EMPOWERING THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY FOR CHANGE:

AN EVALUATION OF PARTICIPATION

IN THE

ASHGROVE HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT PROJECT

Volume 1

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CERTIFICATE

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the work presented in this dissertation is original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted in whole or in part for any degree of Griffith University or other university.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to evaluate aspects of participation in a participatory action research project, the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. Participatory action research is a form of research that creates change as an explicit part of the research process and requires the active participation of those by and for whom the research is being conducted.

This study arose from concerns by this researcher, who is also a co-facilitator of the project, that levels of participation were not as extensive as one might have hoped and that this seemingly low level would have a negative impact on the continuing participation of those already involved. Specifically, this evaluation sought to uncover the reasons that prompted participation, to identify structural barriers to initial involvement and to uncover participants' perceptions of the process, including barriers and opportunities. It also sought to record evidence of any shift in decision making and to draw implications about the findings that could assist the project, the school, other schools and the wider community.

This evaluation involved focus group discussions and interviews with participants actively involved in the school project. The purpose was to uncover their views, feelings and perceptions about their participation and the participatory processes in use generally. It also included some examination of school documents and newsletters and has also drawn on the reflections of this 'insider' researcher, based on two years of involvement in facilitating the project.

The findings that emerge from this study are heartening. Rather than feeling anxious about the long-term sustainability of the project, this researcher now feels more confident about its achievements, both in terms of the changes that have occurred in the school and about the participatory processes and levels of participation. Whilst the evaluation has identified a number of barriers, both institutional, personal and project-related, it has also identified several key factors that serve to promote participation.

In effect, the inclusive, democratic practices of participatory action research, the development of a 'shared vision' for the school, real successes with creating change and the collegiality that has developed between participants all demonstrate that the project *is* successful. These positive aspects, in fact, have served to counteract the perceived barriers. They are all elements that provide impetus to the project and affirm the commitment of participants to continue their personal involvement and to seek to further expand participation to other school community members.

As a result of this evaluation, a number of implications for the continuing project and for the school emerge. These relate specifically to the coordination of the Healthy

Schools process and the development of the Healthy Schools process, including innovative curricular, into the mainstream components of the school organisation. The findings also suggest that negativism and resistance to change can be overcome if open communication, sharing of perceptions and commitment to democratic decision making practices are embodied in the project and guide its development.

The findings also have implications beyond the immediate environment of this particular school. They demonstrate that, in spite of the barriers, participatory action research is a successful process to guide change. The findings also demonstrate that the Healthy Schools process can be successfully initiated and implemented by people at the margins of decision making. It can have a curriculum development focus or a community development orientation, depending on whether the impetus for the project comes from parents, teachers or indeed students. A project such as this may, in fact, provide an impetus to much more extensive community development activities well beyond a narrower school-based focus. The implications for resourcing, implementing and evaluating of outcomes of any Healthy Schools project, therefore, will have to be flexible to meet the potentially wide range of project types that emerge to service the needs of individual school and community settings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research study could not have occurred without the support and encouragement of the Ashgrove School community. Not only has the school been involved in the processes of change associated with the participatory action research project, but members of the school community, especially the principal, and the parents and teachers of the Grounds Committee, have given their time and support to this evaluation. Their willingness to share their feelings and perceptions about the project has provided me with a rich data source.

Especially I would like to thank Sue Cooke who originally brought the idea of Healthy Schools to my attention and initiated its introduction into the school. Sue has been largely the 'interface' between the Healthy Schools project and the school community, committing huge amounts of time and personal effort to building momentum for the project and maintaining support for it. Her tenacity, at times, has been awesome. As co-facilitator throughout the project and 'critical friend' for this evaluation, her insightful perspectives, theoretical understandings and personal friendship have been greatly valued.

To my supervisor, John Fien, I give my heartfelt thanks for his academic support throughout this research. My queries were always kindly met, comments were pertinent and encouragement was appropriate. However, the Masters of Environmental Education program, of which this dissertation is a part, and the graduates from this, will be the lasting legacy to his fine teaching and commitment to the development of environmental education. The support of John, Helen and my fellow students in this Masters program, have in both subtle and explicit ways assisted me throughout this research project.

To my husband and partner, Denis, I am exceptionally grateful for the encouragement, support and fine thinking that has contributed to this dissertation. As an ever willing 'sounding board' for the articulation of ideas, he has contributed in more ways than can be imagined to this finished report.

I would like to thank, also, my young boys, Daniel and Simon, who have let me hog the computer for the past few months and, with remarkable cheerfulness, have tolerated living with *the Masters.* These children provided the impetus for my own initial participation in the Healthy Schools project. This participation, this evaluation and their presence in our lives has illuminated for me, even more than previously, that children and adults can and must work together for change if we are to create futures that are healthy, just and sustainable.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

If we don't change we'll get where we're going.

(in Birch, C.,1993, *Regaining Compassion for Humanity and Nature* Sydney: University of N.S.W.)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study is an evaluation of one phase of an ongoing participatory action research project - the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project at Ashgrove State School, a primary school in Brisbane, Queensland. At the time of this study, the project had been in operation for eighteen months. Evaluation has been a regular part of this action research approach since its inception and indeed is *fundamental* to action research. However, this has been of a relatively informal nature and conducted more in relation to specific aspects of the project than the project overall. Whilst the principal facilitators of the project have engaged in relatively consistent evaluation and reflection, opportunities for a wider group of participants to reflect on their experiences and share their perceptions of the project and the processes have not been formally developed.

The purpose of the evaluation/reflection initiated by this study was to assist further the ongoing project development. The facilitators have had an opportunity to study indepth the reasons for participation and to identify barriers to involvement, but this study seeks also to provide other participants with an opportunity to engage in a co-operative process of evaluation and reflection on the project. Greater engagement by more participants with the way of cooperative reflective activity has the capacity both to strengthen the group and to assist further in the formulation of problems and solutions.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that the facilitators will be able to maintain the high levels of personal involvement that currently prevail with the project. As it is, both facilitators will ultimately leave the project when their youngest children leave the school for high school. The development of strategies to enhance the project's continuation and to widen the base of participants who use cooperative reflective practice, in order to uncover barriers and to find cooperative solutions, is needed if the project is to continue long term.

Specifically, then, this study explores various aspects of the processes of *participation* in the project. These include: motivations for initial participation; factors inhibiting participation; perceptions of the process used; perceptions of barriers to participation; factors fostering continued involvement; evidence of a shift of balance in decision making and opportunities for expanding the participatory processes in the school. It also identifies a number of implications for the project, for this school, for other schools and for the wider community of the use of participatory processes to enact change.

1.1 BACKGROUND

The final decade of the twentieth century is often viewed as a period of increasing uncertainty, instability and rapid change. Concern has been growing with regard to issues as diverse as global environmental degradation, social alienation and personal and family fragmentation. MacKay (1993) refers to this current period as 'the nervous nineties'. A number of writers in recent times have highlighted some of the changes that confront and concern our society. For example, McMichael (1993) states that global environmental change is eroding the life-support systems of the Earth and that this is a threat of major consequence to the world's living species, including humanity. Brown (1992:15) states that there are serious doubts as to the planet's "capacity to sustain future improvements in the human condition". Suzuki (1990:183) comments "that the only way we can get off our destructive path is to develop a radically different perspective on our place in nature". Birch (1993:155) comments that:

> ... in the immediate future there will be less security than in the immediate past, and less stability... The question for us is whether we have the capacity for change to enable us to live fully in a risky future. The ecologically sustainable and just society of the future will be a changed society full of risks.

Today's children may live their entire lives in rapidly changing circumstances, with 'disaster' scenarios an ever-present aspect of their lives. Parents and schools, both major socialising influences for children, have an important role in equipping children with the values and skills that will enable them to cope positively with change; that will, in fact, enable them to manage and create change, rather than be reactive to what is going on around them. Democratic, participative partnerships between parents and school

personnel are to be encouraged if children, and the adults around them, are going to live positive, enabling lives and help create a just and sustainable society. Unfortunately, schools are often sites that reproduce existing hierarchies, actively resist change and often demonstrate undemocratic practice.

The before-school experiences of many parents and children contrast markedly with those that occur once children enter the formal schooling system. From being viewed as their children's first teachers and valued partners in their children's education, many parents can feel ignored and their roles devalued by many practices in schools. Parents may have major concerns about the appropriateness of many existing practices in schools but both parents and children often feel incapable of even raising these issues let alone working to change them.

New approaches and educational strategies are needed to help teachers and parents overcome the barriers that reproduce these disabling conditions. One such approach is 'Healthy Schools', a collaborative school community process for creating educational and social change.

1.2 HEALTHY SCHOOLS

The Healthy Schools program is an initiative of the World Health Organisation (WHO) European Network of Health Promoting Schools. It complements the Healthy Cities, Healthy Communities and Healthy Hospitals programs of WHO. Healthy Schools is gaining acceptance in Europe, Canada and, more recently, in Australia where the National Network for Healthy School Communities has recently been established. State networks, including one in Queensland, have been instituted. Currently, there are two formally recognised pilot schools for the Healthy Schools program in Queensland. Ashgrove State School, the school in which *this* study is located, is one of these.

Healthy Schools takes a *settings* approach to health promotion, a recognition that schools are key environments in which health is created. The Healthy Schools approach seeks to review, create and improve the physical and social environments of school communities through collaborative, community-based processes which link health, environmental and educational concerns. The Canadian Office of Health Promotion

(1991:1), for example, aims to "enhance the health of school-aged children by enabling them to become *actively involved* in learning and practising skills for decision making, coping and community interaction". The European Network of Health Promoting Schools (undated:7) states that the Healthy Schools program aims "to empower young people to make their own decisions". The Australian Network for Healthy School Communities (1991:1) emphasises the process of "continuing review and reflection on the expectations of schools and communities", as important aspects of a Healthy Schools approach. Common to all programs, though, is the empowerment of members of a school community - children, parents, teachers and the wider community - in collaboratively making changes in the school environment, inclusive of all the social, political, physical and personal dimensions. The creation of schools that value all members, that are healthful places and that encourage life-long action in health promotion, advocacy for the environment and participatory democracy are anticipated outcomes of the Healthy Schools approach.

1.3 THE ASHGROVE HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT PROJECT

The *settings* approach of this Healthy Schools initiative means there is no one way for a school to be engaged in the process of becoming a health-promoting environment. Consequently, there are multiple entry points (Figure 1.1) into the process, determined by the needs and aspirations of individual school communities. One school, for example, may focus on nutrition practices and nutrition education; another may commence with exploring teacher stress and related health issues; another may begin with issues related to playground bullying.

The Ashgrove State School community focussed its Healthy Schools initiative on health and environment issues related to the school's outdoor environment. This venture, called the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, drew its impetus from the Canadian Healthy Schools approach and the exemplary model of the Aranda Primary School in Canberra (Butz: 1992), which had commenced its Healthy Schools project in 1991. At Ashgrove, there was an initial focus on planning and implementing sun safety policy, followed with planning for a 'whole school grounds' redevelopment (Figure 1.2). This was initiated in order to optimise spaces for more effective utilisation than was currently

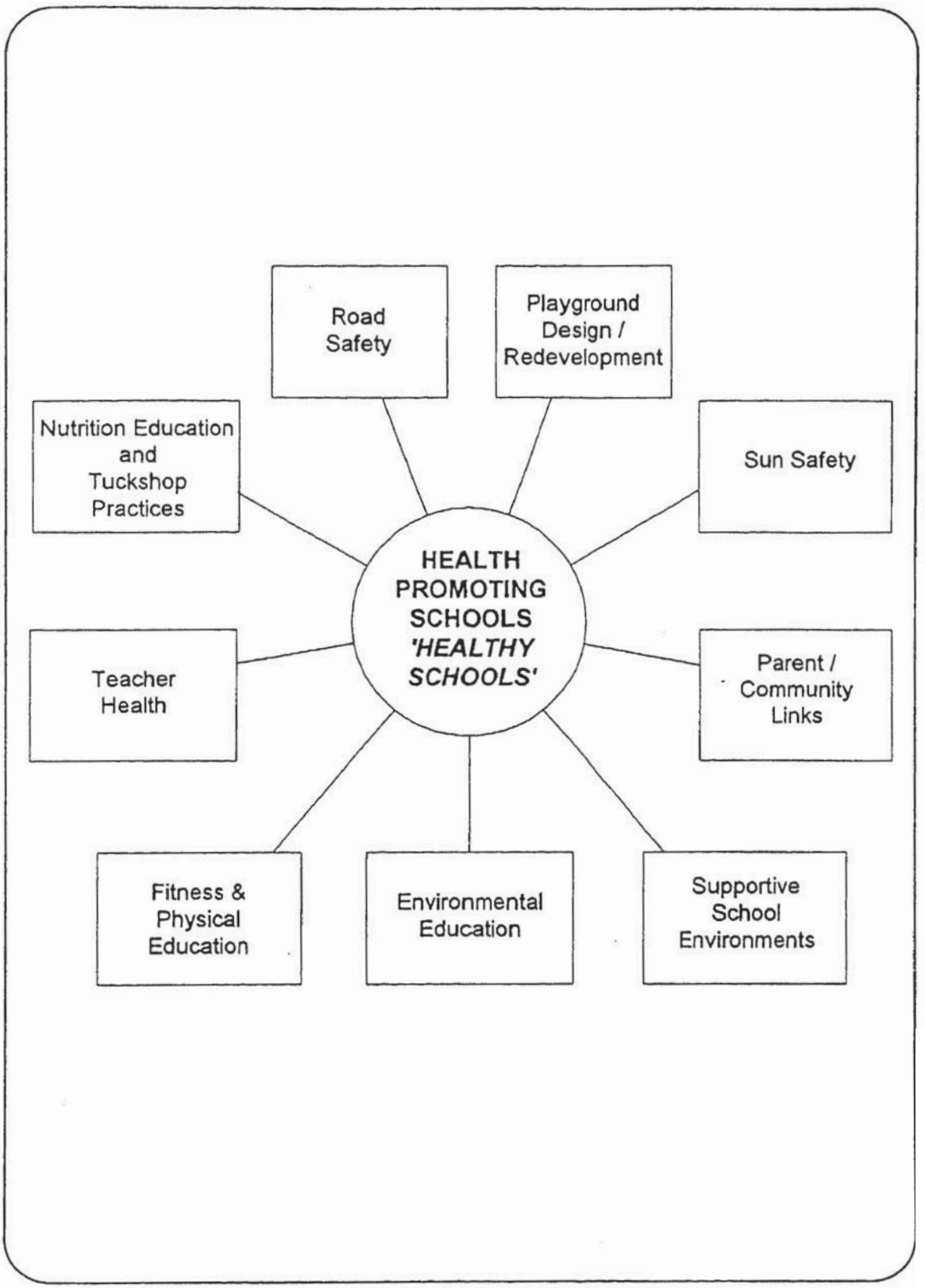


Figure 1.1 Some Potential 'Entry Points' For Developing A Health Promoting School

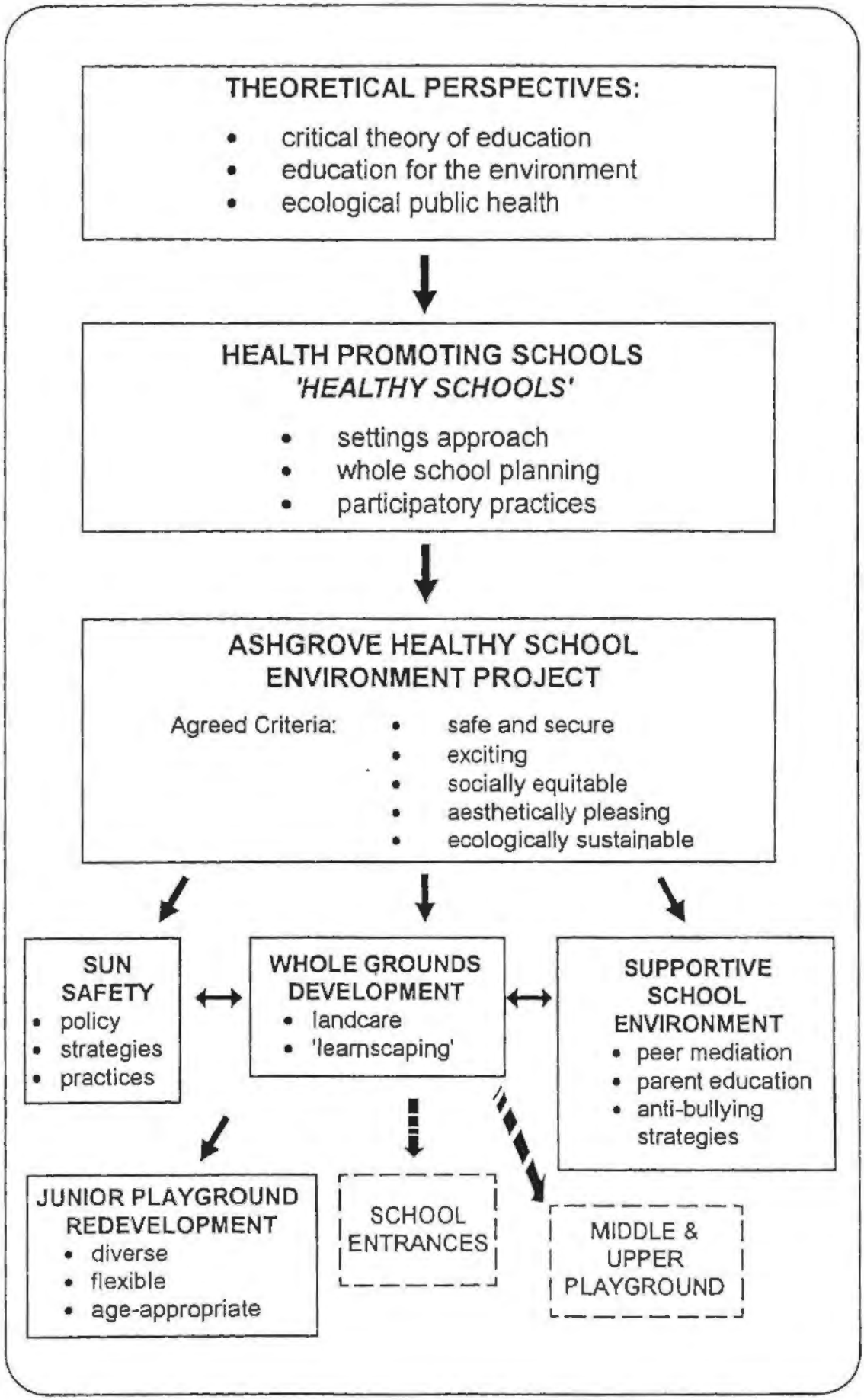


Figure 1.2 Overview of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project - Perspectives & Actions

occurring, to provide shade and variety of experiences for children and to support the principles of landcare, water conservation and biodiversity. Within this plan, the school has also designed, and at the time of writing, has just completed Phase One of a Junior Playground which will provide a wide variety of opportunities for free play and teacher-initiated experiences. In recent times, the process has expanded to include a focus on developing supportive strategies for pro-social behaviors.

The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is essentially a community development project reflecting its initiation and implementation by parents, as representatives of the community in the school. Had the project been generated by teachers, it is more likely to have been shaped as curriculum development, as this is typically the focus of teachers. As community development, then, the importance of critically examining issues associated with participation is obvious. A project seeking to generate in school community members a sense of, and experience in, being able to create changes to the physical and social aspects of the school environment and to the culture surrounding school decision making processes, needs wide-spread community support and participation.

The project employs democratic processes that strive to empower individuals to work collectively on issues relevant to their own experiences and within this particular school setting. It uses a critical action research methodology and, specifically, that of participatory action research. It is necessary to provide some background to this project in order to appreciate fully the objectives and methods of the evaluation reported in this dissertation.

1.4 THE STORY OF THE ASHGROVE HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT PROJECT

April 1992

The Healthy Schools approach at Ashgrove State School was initially introduced to the school by a parent who sought, and attained, the support of this researcher as co-facilitator. The approach was supported by the school principal and adopted by the school's Parents' and Citizens' Association as a mechanism for responding to concerns and issues related to some unsafe and undesirable outdoor practices and the degraded

play environment of the school. These two parents agreed to become co-facilitators of the Grounds Committee of the Parents' & Citizens' Association, as this presented the best avenue for implementing the Healthy Schools approach. Of particular concern to these parents were the issue of sun safety, a desire to 'green' the landscape of the school, a need to redevelop the deteriorated Year 1 playground and some concerns for the social needs of children during lunch times and other breaks (Photographs 1 and 2).

In order to determine the strength of these concerns a 'visioning' workshop was conducted by the facilitators with a small group of interested parents. This workshop involved the participants in responding to some passages of text that required them to imagine their 'ideal' setting superimposed on the actual school setting. These 'visions' were then shared with other group members; the responses were then categorised; and generalised visions for a healthy, supportive school environment were obtained. This activity validated the general concerns of the two facilitators.

May 1992

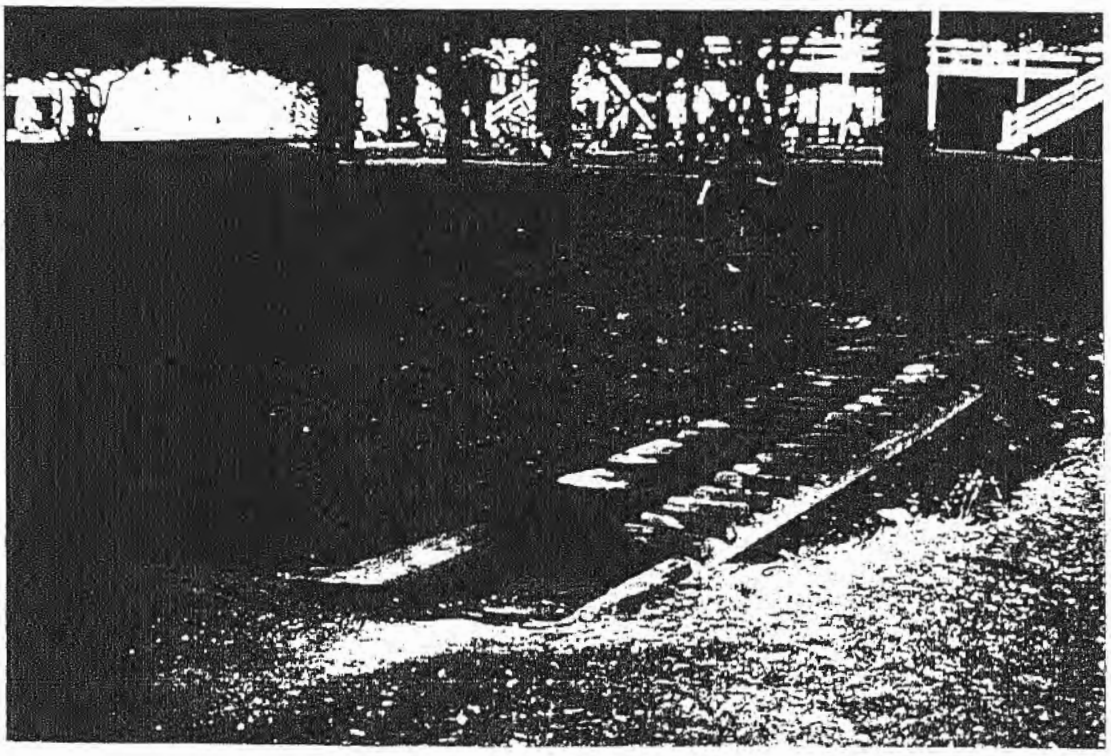
A similar 'visioning' workshop was conducted with teachers, reinforcing general concerns with shade, softening the landscape and redeveloping the play areas. In order to develop these ideas across the whole of the school a written survey of all families, teachers and ancillary staff in the school was conducted to gain a broader range of perceptions of the school environment and ideas for change.

The Student Council, an elected group of children from Years 5, 6 and 7 initiated and conducted an oral survey of all classes to gauge student needs and concerns for the play areas within the school. They also presented the Grounds Committee with its first income - a cheque for $150 which had been raised through contributions obtained from a 'free dress' day.

June - July 1992

Data from the two visioning activities, the written survey and the children's surveys were recorded and analysed for common themes. This provided a data base for identifying an overview of 'what we'd like' for the school community. This data confirmed the earlier perceptions of the co-facilitators, that there was a general desire to see the

Photograph 1: An image of the school showing the starkness and sterility of its grounds and buildings - April 1992.



Photograph 2: The Grade 1 playground before the commencement of the Healthy School Environment Project - unsafe and degraded grounds - April 1992.

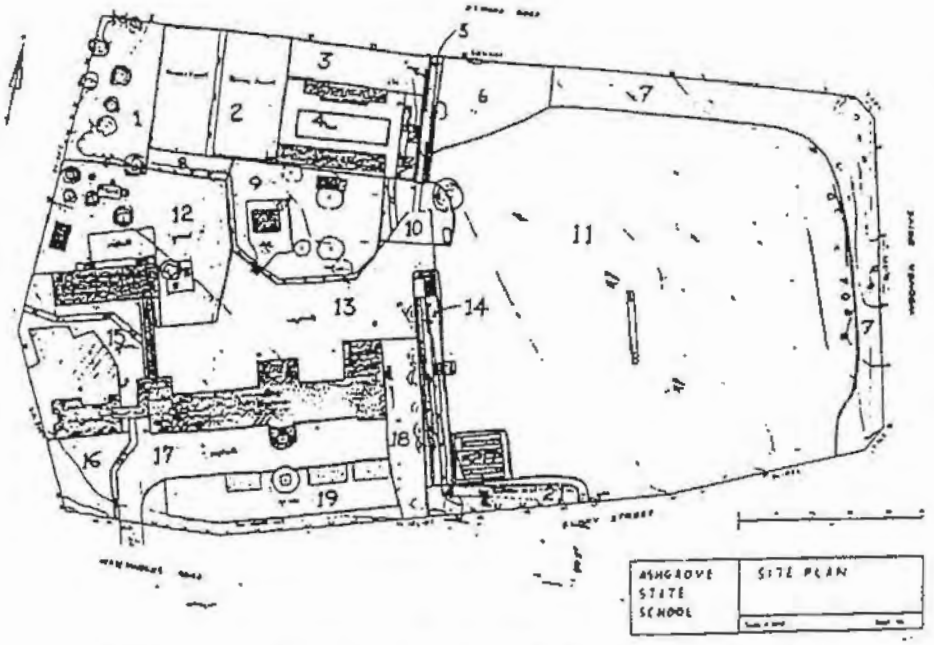
grounds as a greener, friendlier, more diverse environment. There was a general desire for shade and shady seating, more diverse play spaces for children, extra opportunities for outdoor learning, with a focus on the much degraded Year 1 playground.

August - November 1992

A series of workshops was held with interested parents, teachers, the school captain and the school principal. All participants became members of the Grounds Committee, which previously had consisted of only the two facilitators. It was desirable to broaden the base of this group in order to expand the levels of input, share the effort and to encourage broad participation in the decision making. The first workshop involved a collaborative site analysis of the schoolgrounds to identify their positive and negative features. In essence, this provided an inventory of 'what we've got'. At this first meeting, also, a sub-group drafted a sun safety policy in collaboration with an education officer from the Queensland Cancer Fund. A later workshop collated the results of the visioning activities, the surveys and the deliberations of the expanded Grounds Committee and resulted, ultimately, in a 'shared vision' for the schoolgrounds. A set of principles to guide planning were also collectively determined and agreed to by the school community (Plan 1).

The deliberations of workshops were reported to the school community in the weekly school newsletter. Feedback from the school community to the Grounds Committee was encouraged via the school newsletter and by placing copies of the plans, with comments sheets, at major school entrances. The collected data from the school community were formulated into a draft 'concept plan' for the whole schoolground. This was revised to a second draft based on additional inputs from school community members.

It had become apparent to all Grounds Committee members, by this stage, that a focus on just one area of the schoolground, such as the high priority Year 1 play area, could not adequately address a number of significant underlying problems, such as soil erosion and water run-off, and issues related to the social integration of children from different year levels. The committee, therefore, proceeded towards a draft 'master plan' for the whole school grounds with redevelopment of the Junior Playground a priority.



AGREED CRITERIA FOR GROUNDS PLANNING
FOR A
HEALTHY, SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

- safe and secure
- educationally and otherwise exciting
- socially equitable
- aesthetically pleasing
- ecologically sustainable

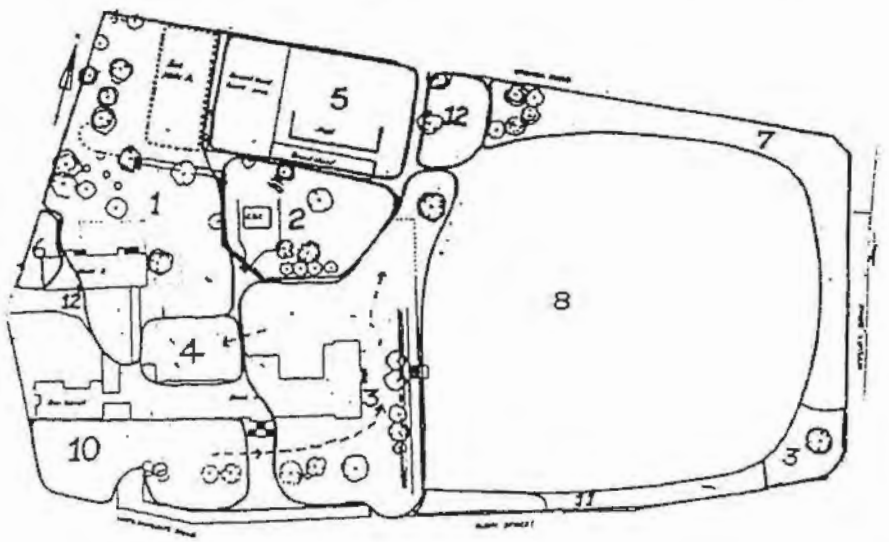


Figure 1.4: (a) Plan of the schoolground before the project began in April 1992.
(b) Agreed Criteria for the developments and the 'concept' plan - Oct 199

December 1992

By the end of the year, a copy of the draft sun safety policy and strategies was sent to all families and teachers in the school for comment. These validated the policy and strategies. The sun safety policy was then supported by the Parents' and Citizens' Association at its final meeting for the year. This became official school policy from the beginning of the 1993 school year.

The Grounds Committee decided to brief two consultants. The first was a landscape architect with experience in 'learnscaping', the design of environments with an explicit focus on the potentials for learning and teaching, rather than simply site utility or beauty. His task was to detail the master plans for the whole school ground and the Junior Playground and to consult with a play consultant. This latter consultant was experienced in the design of playgrounds for young children and was briefed to provide input into the design of appropriate features for the playground.

Discussions regarding planning and funding of the project were initiated with the Education Department and QBuild, the government departments responsible for approving subsidised funding, plans and constructions in state schools.

January - March 1993

Early in the 1993 school year, draft sketch plans for the Junior Playground were available for comment. The play consultant met with parents and teachers of the lower primary classes to assist in further clarification of child and teacher needs regarding playground design and use. The landscape architect met with the Grounds Committee at a Saturday workshop. Feedback from these forums and from the wider school community was incorporated into a final master plan for this area.

April 1993

At the second workshop of the Grounds Committee for 1993, comprising parents (including Parents' and Citizens' Association representatives) and teachers, a Project Management team was established to oversee the implementation phase of the Junior Playground redevelopment. This involved hiring outside contractors recommended by

the landscape architect, hiring contractors from within the parent body and organising volunteer workers.

A National Landcare Grant submission was prepared and submitted seeking funding for the on-going developments arising from the whole-school plan, particularly to reshape the surface of the oval to improve water seepage, reduce water loss through poorly designed and/or used drinking taps, irrigation systems, pool maintenance practices and roof run-off losses. Revegetation to conserve soil and water, to enhance biodiversity and to further develop the educational and play utility of the schoolgrounds were also major aspects of this submission.

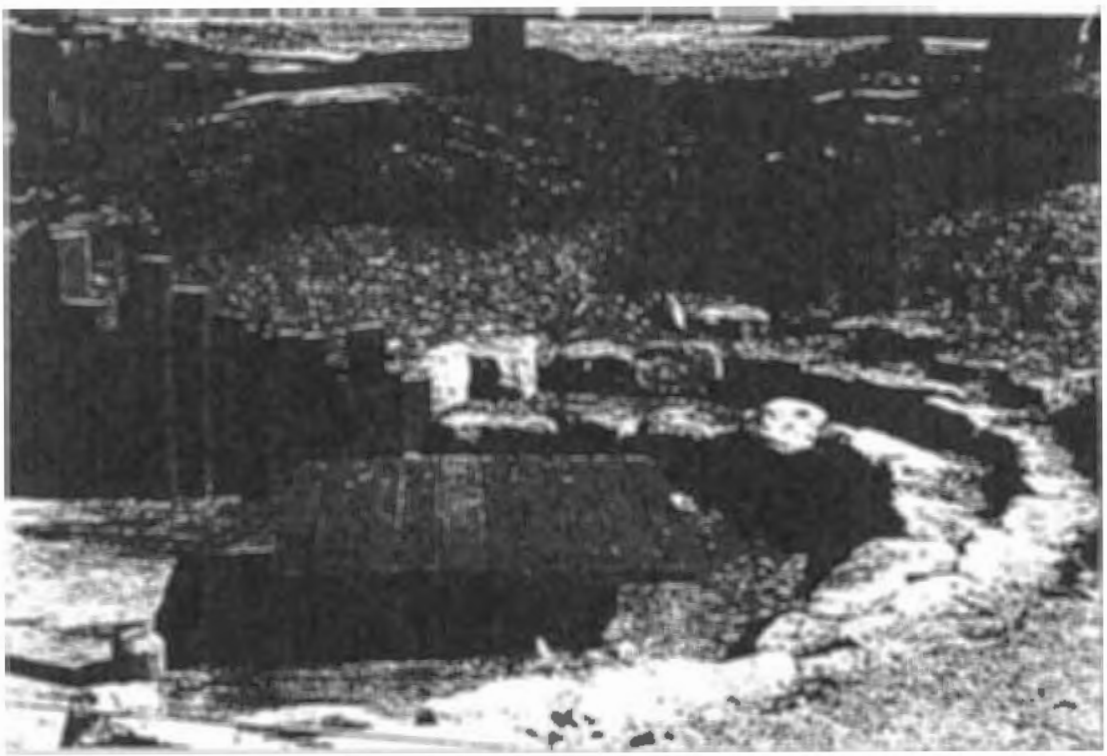
May 1993

The school was granted financial support for labour and materials, to assist the development of the Junior Playground. This was made available by the State Minister for Administrative Services through representations to the local Member of State Parliament, who wished to express support for the community development focus of the project. This had the effect of speeding up the ground works but, at the same time, some of the impetus of the collaborative process within the school was lost.

June - August 1993

The school was granted support from the 'Establishing A Healthy Schools Network' fund. This is an initiative of the Health Promotion Unit of the Queensland Department of Health and administered by the Department of Education. This funding was for curriculum purposes, such as teacher/parent inservice programs and the provision of teaching resources. The writing of a case study to inform other school communities wishing to follow similar processes is an expected outcome of this funding.

Advice was received that the application for the National Landcare Grant was not successful. However, the redevelopment of the Junior Playground commenced with the State Government support and additional school funds. This lead to about 80 percent completion, by late August, of this area incorporating a bush theatre (Photograph 3), waterplay area, sandpit and softfall area for the later siting of play equipment.



Photograph 3: The 'bush theatre' in the Junior Playground redevelopment - September 1993.

September 1993

The Grounds Committee reapplied for a Landcare Grant under the City Landcare scheme. Minor jobs such as painting and some safety works were undertaken on the playground site. These were carried out by parent volunteers, under the direction of the project manager appointed at the April Grounds Committee workshop.

October - November 1993

The Grounds Committee convened to determine how to complete the Junior Playground redevelopment, which had stalled somewhat due to a shortage of funds and work and other commitments of the facilitators and other members of the Grounds Committee. The development of a major shade structure in the school grounds to serve as an assembly area, teaching and play space was also discussed and initial plans examined, at this meeting.

Working bees, comprising members of the Grounds Committee, their children and other interested parents, were held over two weekends and resulted in most of the soil, mulch and turf being laid on site. Negotiations on the planning and funding of play structures within the Junior play area were commenced.

A significant advance for the Healthy Schools process at this stage was the awareness that the process had the potential to be incorporated into the next School Development Plan. The facilitators of the project volunteered for positions on the Collaborative School Review panel, an overseeing group of parents and teachers, to guide review processes on which inputs into the next School Development Plan were based. This enabled a focus on issues related to the Healthy Schools concept and process to be incorporated into the review.

A Supportive School Environment Committee was formed to examine supportive (including anti-bullying) strategies for developing pro-social behaviors. This was also an initiative of parents in the school and is adopting a 'whole school approach'. Anticipated activities of this group include parent and teacher inservice and peer

mediation, where trained students assist in the resolution of disputes, particularly in the playground.

December 1993 - January 1994

The school was notified that the second application for a Landcare grant was not successful. However, three working bees, with parents, children and teachers were held over the Christmas vacation to complete plantings, drainage and paving. A roster of teachers and parents to water the newly planted gardens during the Christmas break was drawn up and implemented.

Negotiations commenced with the Department of Education, QBuild and the Parents' and Citizens' Association regarding a lightweight shade cover over the sandpit in the Junior Playground. Final details for this were submitted to the Education Department and QBuild for approval. Negotiations continued for the design of the play equipment to be incorporated into the Junior Playground. This involved a fixed set of structures with moveable attachments to maximise choice and interest. Plans and subsidy applications were submitted for this play equipment and for the multipurpose assembly area.

February 1994 - March 1994

Upon commencement of the 1994 school year, the school community was encouraged to vote for the selection of the colour of the shade cover for the sandpit area. A high response rate to this 'referendum' was achieved, particularly from the children in the school.

A first meeting initiated by the Supportive School Environment Committee was held. This meeting shared supportive anti-bullying strategies and processes which had been implemented with success at another school.

The fixed playground equipment with its flexible attachments was selected and installed, completing the major works for this part of the Junior Playground. Teachers of the Year 1 children planned a day of activities to introduce the children to the new playground. This enabled teachers and children to explore its diversity and to have

Photograph 4: Part of the Junior Playground before the installation of the flexible play equipment - February 1994.

some 'on-the-spot' inservice from the play equipment manufacturer. This curriculum activity involved children, teachers and parents.

A presentation about the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project was given at the 1994 Health Promotion Conference in Melbourne by the co-facilitator of the project. This expedited the development of a poster, brochure and photographic record of the project which has been used to inform new and existing parents and teachers to the school about this Healthy Schools project, as well as other school and community groups.

Ongoing....

Now that the children are using the redeveloped Junior Playground, observations by parents and teachers of this usage are underway. This will determine movement patterns, child interest in the playground features and teacher use of this resource. These observations will help determine best sitings and plantings of vegetation according to child usage factors rather than having these imposed on the children by adults who will not be the major users of the area. Other minor adjustments, such as laying stepping stones will be undertaken. Teachers have requested inservice education on the potential uses of the area to enhance teaching and learning. It is anticipated that this activity will occur later in the year.

Now that this part of the grounds redevelopment is complete, further implementation of the 'whole grounds' plan is underway. Achievable goals for 1994 need to be established. It is likely that these will include the redevelopment of one of the two major school entrances. This area incorporates the school greenhouse and abuts the Junior Playground. The greenhouse redevelopment will enable it to be used by teachers and children as part of curriculum activities. Currently, its major purpose is for the potting and care of plants for sale as part of the school's fundraising activities. A Greening Australia Grant was obtained for this redevelopment.

As earlier indicated, the formal recognition by the school community of the principles of Healthy Schools is being aimed for. This involves the school community in a collaborative school review process (underway at the time of writing) which informs the

rewriting of the School Development Plan. The recognition of the participative processes employed in the Healthy Schools project as an exemplar of practice for other projects and developments in the school is anticipated.

A number of forums for dissemination of information about this project and the process of Healthy Schools are being developed so that other school communities can learn about the Ashgrove experience for change. The Healthy Schools Network, in collaboration with the co-facilitators, is preparing a case study scheduled for completion in July 1994. Also, the co-facilitators have worked with Forestry and Landcare officers in the Queensland Department of Primary Industries in developing a case study on the project. Requests for information about the project from local schools are forthcoming. Interest in the project has extended outside the region also, with an invitation to write a paper about the project for the international conference of the World Education Fellowship to be held in Tokyo in August 1994.

1.5 THE CRITICAL RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE OF THE ASHGROVE HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT PROJECT

The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project uses a form of research known as participative action research. This type of research follows a socially-critical perspective which according to Preston and Symes (1992:63), involves "a questioning and insightful analysis of problems with a view to social transformation". As such, it is also *emancipatory*.

At its most general, a participatory action research design, indeed all action research, is best described as a spiral consisting of continuous and overlapping cycles. The completion of one cycle is the beginning of the next. Smith and Lovatt (1990:173) state that within each cycle are interrelated steps involving planning, implementing, observing/documenting, reflection/evaluation and critical analysis.

The processes of action research involve all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they view as problematic) to induce some change which they see as beneficial (Bassey,1992:5). As Wadsworth (1993:1) comments "it is not just research which we hope will be followed by action! It is action which is researched,

changed and re-researched, within the research process". In fact, there are countless tiny cycles of participatory reflection on action, learning about action and then new informed action which is in turn the subject of further reflecting. Change is not an additional benefit of action research - it is fundamental to it and happens throughout. The research may change shape and focus over time as participants focus and refocus their understandings about what is 'really' happening and what is really important to them.

In the educational context, action research is referred to by Carr and Kemmis (1986:155) as committed research that is *for* education rather than *about* education. In writing about research in environmental education, Robottom and Hart (1993:65) comment that critical action research is most appropriate for environmental education as the researchers are 'insiders' who direct and own the research process as well as the outcomes of the research. This critical action research approach recognises that the understandings of participants form the basis for social action and that by being deliberately activist, the participants can alter the context, change the limits and create new understandings.

All action research, then, draws together action and reflection. McCutcheon and Jung (1990:144-151) comment that taking a critical perspective to research is denoted by this interest in praxis where there is an *emancipatory interplay between action and reflection.* They elaborate:

> Action by itself is directionless and reflection by itself is aimless. The dialectical movement between action and reflection takes into account the complexities of the practical, sociocultural factors and the construction of meaning... By and large, the critical perspective involves a concerted effort to reexamine the taken-for-granted and institutionalised constraints of schooling.

Consequently, a critical perspective runs counter to the present tradition in research which views action and reflection as separate activities. Carson, like several researchers in this area (Carr and Kemmis,1986; Guba and Lincoln,1989; Reason,1988) sees action research as a different paradigm from more traditional research approaches. Wadsworth (1993:2), too, identifies participatory action research as representing 'new paradigm' thinking. She writes that participatory action research is a genuinely democratic process

whereby those to be helped determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry. Wadsworth (1993:1) continues:

> Much participatory action research typically involves yourself: those who share your concerns, experiences and interests: others suffering from the problematic situation; others trying to assist it to change; and those who oversee the material resources needed to underpin the change effort (such as funds, people, salaries, services, office resources,etc.) Bringing these parties together, and absorbing new ones as the action research effort proceeds to unfold and implicate parties further afield, is not merely a side issue of 'entry to the field' but a central focus for achieving understanding and change.

Participatory action research works to assist a community-of-interest, generally a group with unmet needs, disadvantage or marginalisation, to pursue their inquiries by themselves and for themselves. The difficulties of engaging these disadvantaged or marginalised groups and having them remain in the research process are problematic. Wadsworth in fact likens the discussion of how to achieve the conditions of mutual involvement, participation and collaboration as being very similar to tbe discussions about how to achieve 'community development'.

This type of critically reflective research, then, is deliberately a social process and not surprisingly, participatory action research is commonly associated with community development, educational reform and political action. In the context of schools, it focuses on the social practices of education and offers considerable capacity for reform. Thus, states Carson (1990:168), critically reflective action research is characterised by a continuing program of reform where the eventual hope would be for a new kind of school and a new kind of society.

As mentioned earlier, the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project has been conceptualised as a 'community development' project within a school. It is fulfilling the 'unmet needs' of children in relation to the physical and social environment of the school. For parents, and to a lesser extent, for children, 'unmet needs' in relation to participation in decision making are also being met through this project. It is apparent, then, that this evaluation and the participatory action research process are concerned

with the same fundamental questions of mutual involvement, participation and collaboration.

1.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As a participatory action research project, participation by member groups of the school community in decision making in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, is fundamental. This study reflects upon and evaluates 'participation' in the project, with a particular interest in assessing the 'realignment' of decision making from a teacher-dominated hierarchical model to a more participative approach that deliberately includes other member groups, particularly parents and children. The objectives of this study are to:

1. determine those factors that lead to initial interest by participants in change-making processes;

2. determine what hurdles and barriers mitigate against participation and continuing involvement;

3. explore the potential of shared decision making both inside and outside the school context.

More specifically, this evaluative study seeks to answer the following eight research questions:

1. What are the motivations for participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project?

2. What mitigates against initial participation in decision making?

3. What perceptions of the participatory processes are held by participants in the projects?

4. What are the perceived barriers to the process?

5. What have been identified as important for maintaining and building momentum for participation in the project?

6. What evidence is there of a shift of balance in decision making within the school community?

7. What are the opportunities for expanding participatory processes within the school context?

8. What can be learned about participatory action research that assists the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project and may inform other schools and the community about the processes?

1.7 RESEARCH APPROACH FOR THIS EVALUATION

Reflection and evaluation are integral to action research and, as such, it is problematical to highlight just one phase. However, the value in raising issues concerned with the participatory processes themselves will benefit the ongoing action research process. It is important, then, that there be conjunction between this evaluation and the participatory action research process.

An 'open inquiry' evaluation method (Wadsworth,1991:34-43) with a problem-identifying focus has been selected for this evaluation. This approach increases the chances of problem-solving outcomes with changes for improvement in areas identified as important. At the time of commencing this specific evaluation, the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project had been 'in action' for 18 months. Whilst there has been regular and ongoing evaluation and reflection by the principal facilitators of the project, there had not been any formal discussions of the process of collaborative decision making with participants in the project or with other members of the school community who may not have been actively involved. Thus, the facilitators believed that an evaluation was timely for a number of reasons:

First, the project was moving from the 'conceptualisation' phase and into the 'implementation' phase. There was a need to record perceptions of this earlier phase to

guide future actions, as future involvement of participants was likely to be quite different. In fact, it was possible that a different set of participants would emerge, and that the insights of the original participants would be lost to the process.

Second, the earlier phase was seen as crucial to the whole project in that it set the working parameters for the project. The effectiveness of the collaborative decision making process needed to be evaluated for the ongoing sustainability of the Healthy Schools approach in the school, particularly in terms of continuing facilitation.

Third, it was perceived by the researcher that there were some barriers regarding the 'ownership' of the project. Evaluation and analysis at this point would help illuminate these and guide subsequent actions.

Fourth, the Ashgrove State School is part of the Network for Healthy Schools Pilot Project and the Schoolground Planning and Support Network and as such is in a position to inform other school communities of the Healthy Schools approach to health and environmental change. Evaluation of the project would be useful for assisting other school communities to undertake change.

1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study can be seen at a number of levels - within the project itself and its impact on the school, as an exemplar of practice for other schools and communities and as a contributor to change for healthful, just and sustainable futures.

At the Ashgrove School level, this evaluation/reflection on the participatory processes of the Healthy Schools Environment Project should inform current and subsequent actions within the action research project to improve further these processes. As it is anticipated that the grounds redevelopment aspect of the Healthy Schools Project has at least a ten to fifteen year timespan, it is imperative that the processes by which people are recruited to the project and their willingness to remain as part of the team, are examined. Barriers to participation, particularly those between teachers and parents, need to be explored so that actions can be taken to remove or reduce these, in

democratic and supportive ways. The exploration of opportunities for enhancing children's participation are also very important considerations.

At a systems-wide level, this project comes at a time when there is considerable momentum being given to devolution principles within the Department of Education. The Minister of Education has been supporting the shift towards delegation of responsibility to schools (Walker,1993:1) and the Queensland Council of Parents' and Citizens' Associations is supporting these initiatives. However, it has been reported that many teachers feel threatened by the increasing role of parents in children's education, and that teachers and parents should work to improve their relationship at the school level.

The Ashgrove School is a pilot school for the multi-sectoral initiative 'Establishing a Healthy Schools Network'. A clear understanding of the opportunities and barriers of participative projects that bring teachers, parents and children together to explore and create actions for change, may have benefits in informing other school communities about change processes as devolution gathers pace. The possibilities for informing others about practices and processes that support devolution, that create change within the school itself and that aim to provide children and adults with skills, attitudes and values for just and sustainable futures are of significance.

1.9 OVERVIEW OF FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

The details of this research dissertation are outlined in the following chapters of this report. A summary of each of these chapters is provided here.

A review of relevant literature is provided in Chapter 2, providing a theoretical framework for the study. A critique of schools from the perspective of critical theory is presented. The role of environmental education *for* the environment and health education from the perspective of 'ecological public health', is given. Discussion of their common or shared agenda in providing theory with a complementary 'practice' component and an overview of the Healthy Schools process as an example of this, is provided. An examination of the literature in relation to theory and practice of community participation in schools is also given.

Chapter 3 details the research methods used in this evaluation. The reasons for selecting an 'open inquiry' evaluation approach are outlined. The conduct of the study is presented, with details of the research techniques used to collect data from the school community. The role of the researcher in 'insider' research is discussed as well as an exploration of issues of reliability and validity as these apply to this open inquiry evaluation. The processes adopted for the analysis of data are outlined.

Chapter 4 details the findings and discussion of this evaluation of the participatory processes of the Ashgrove Healthy Schools Environment Project. These specifically address the first seven research questions of this study.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, presents a short summary of the findings and associated discussion. It raises issues associated with conducting a more formalised evaluation as part of participatory action research. It also addresses the final research question of this study which concerns the implications of the findings for the project and the school, other schools and for communities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

At school, there are five rules for every one thing!

(Simon, aged 6 years: 26/3/94)

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Healthy Schools is an initiative with world-wide participation which seeks to create and improve the physical and social environments of school communities through collaborative, community-based processes which link education, environment and health interests. Schools have been identified as key environments in which health, in its broadest sense, is created. Kickbush (1991:19) holds a view of health "as something that is not causal, but rather as something that is patterned and that schools are part of this patterning process".

The school community is often viewed as a microcosm of the wider community and, as such, has the potential to be "a model and training ground for a healthy future" (Healthy Schools pamphlet, undated). However, Trainer (1991:106) states that "school is an intensely authoritarian institution, probably more so than any other including prisons". Schools, therefore, may have difficulties acting as effective models and training grounds for the community. Consequently, there is a role for the community and particularly for parents, to assist schools to change so that they *can* pattern futures that are better, healthier and more democratic than at present. The Healtby Schools approach, using participatory action research as the vehicle, provides a framework to assist these processes of change.

This literature review provides the theoretical framework for this study and is organised in three sections. First, it provides a critique of schooling from the perspective of critical theory. Second, it links this to recent pedagological developments in environmental education and health education. The emerging links between these two areas of education are discussed, as well as the place of the Healthy Schools process in strengthening these links. Third, a review of reform in education, from the perspective of community schooling, the role of parents in school decision making and the empowerment of parents as decision makers is provided.

2.1 A CRITIQUE OF SCHOOLING

Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowset (1982:157) say of schooling that:

> (It) is not only a matter of doing things to individual lives, but is also a way of organising those lives. Schools help to shape the way society is arranged, from the most immediate and obvious level of friendships and relationships to the most general and extended relationships or 'structures'.

Critical theorists in education, particularly those with an interest in the concept of 'resistance', are concerned with the structures and organisation of life in schools, especially as they contribute to the *status quo* and the reproduction of hierarchy, domination and authoritarianism. Trainer (1991:106), in his critique of schooling, states that schools reproduce the modes of organisation and the kinds of relationships that are suited to an emphasis on individualism, materialism and control. He continues:

> The hidden curriculum of schools socialises to the conditions of work in industrial society, that is, to the alienated labour the factory mode of production imposes. We learn to work for a boss and to do what we are told without much say or interest in the purpose of the work.... we learn to work as individuals... we learn to work for extrinsic rewards.... We do not learn to expect work to be a source of enjoyment or personal growth. Hence, the conditions of the school 'correspond' to the conditions of work in industrial-consumer society.

The economy and capitalism, then, are seen as structural forces behind the dynamics of the school and classroom. Ballantine (1989) writes that the routines and rituals of schools represent the dominant value system and that schools pass this on to young people, through teachers controlling the use of time and space, initiating interactions and defining the rules. Even the current wave of school reform is essentially conservative in origin, as the transformation of the school from a factory model to a corporate model indicates. Under the corporate model, the 'mode of production' may be less material and industrial, but is still concerned with the signs and symbols of the industrial-consumer society. Thus, writes Pinar (1992:231) the role of the teacher is reconceived from factory supervisor to corporate manager and the modes of cognition and the kinds of relationships remain linked to the economy.

Schools have obviously been quite successful in their roles as agents of social reproduction, given the universality and stability of their structural organisation over almost two centuries. As Stevenson (1987:73) writes, "put simply, their intended function was not to promote social change or reconstruction". Historically, he continues, schools have been generally efficient at meeting their intended purpose - that of mass education, in transmitting basic knowledge, conveying a broad understanding of society and the student's role in it. They were not intended to develop critical thinkers, social inquirers and problem solvers or active participants in decision making. However, in contemporary society, containing a plurality of cultures and subcultures, the selection of cultural knowledge, skills and values to transmit becomes a problem. Schooling is faced with choices in defining the culture it is to transmit. These choices ultimately reflect the *mainstream* or dominant beliefs, values and norms shared by those who have political power in society. As Apple (1979:1982) comments, schools continue to convey norms of individualism, competition, achievement and independence, those norms that prevail in the dominant culture and maintain the existing structure of society. In this respect, education also acts in the economic sector of a society to reproduce important aspects of inequality, as some groups have less access to culturally valued forms of knowledge.

Apple and Weis (1983) state that this hegemonic view of schools as places that seek only to maximise the achievement of students and to transmit the values of the dominant culture, needs to be challenged. They claim that this psychological and individualistic view of schools needs to be interpreted more socially, culturally and structurally. Thus, Apple (1979:163) defines schools as being both *productive* and *reproductive* apparatuses of the state. He argues that school culture is not only a product of capitalism, in providing the technical and administrative knowledge needed to keep capital and power circulating in the hands of the dominant order. He states that it is also a relatively autonomous sphere of "lived experiences" and "everyday patterns of interaction" of students and teachers, and that consequently, there are opportunities for the development of a *critical* curriculum community that takes an advocacy position on a number of fronts, both inside and outside education.

Critical theories, writes Gibson (1986:60-61) are essentially concerned with showing how schools "structure the experiences of subordinate groups". However, *resistance* is committed to the emancipatory interest of these groups: the raising of radical consciousness and a commitment to action. Giroux (1988:75), a leading theorist of resistance in education, has, with Apple, given critical theory a wider perspective than that which maintains that schools are "merely agencies of domination and reproduction and that all forms of authority serve only to maintain such domination". Resistance theories explore the possibilities for schooling to take a role in challenging and producing forms of knowledge, social relations and values that are more emancipatory and more resistant to the ideas, practices and values of the dominant culture. McLaren (1989:200), in his analysis of the work of Apple and Giroux, supports this when he states of schools:

> They are also places where particular forms of knowledge, social relations and values can be taught to educate students to take their place within society from a position of self and social empowerment, rather than from a position of ideological and economic subordination.

While there is some criticism that critical theory is "long on analysis and short on prescription" (Gibson 1986:61), there is, within the theorising, the broad call for the restructuring of social relationships through the transformation of the economic system. The connection between schooling and its role in the production and reproduction of capitalist practices and values, implies that schools have a part to play in transforming these. As McLaren (1989:200) writes, the resistance theory of Giroux offers the "collective political struggle amongst parents, teachers and students around the issues of power and social determination as the way forward". Apple provides more direction by signifying that successful educational reform must include a number of dynamics: outside struggles over modes of production; reforms in the workplace; the democratisation of decision making and social practices in the schools; and the efforts of classroom teachers to make coalitions with progressive social movements in the wider society. The challenge for schools in creating social change is clearly established. Schools have a part in transforming the industrial-consumer economic values that, as Stevenson (1987:74) writes, "aid and abet environmental (and human) degradation". Clearly a part of the challenge for schools is to support the transformation of values for a sustainable planet in which all people live with equal human dignity.

2.2 ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Environmental education has been defined by Fien (1988:10) as:

> ... an across the curriculum approach to learning that is useful to individuals and groups in coming to understand the environment with the ultimate objective of developing caring and committed attitudes that will foster the desire to act responsibly in the environment. Thus, environmental education is concerned about knowledge, and also, feelings, attitudes, skills and social action.

Environmental education has traditionally had a strong emphasis on experiences *in* the environment, namely, out-of-doors experiences providing direct contact with natural systems. It has also been concerned with the provision of studies *about* the environment, providing opportunities to understand the workings of natural systems and the impacts and interactions of humans within those systems. However, in recent times, there has been a reorienting of environmental education to engage in social critique and the adoption of an 'action' orientation. This is known as environmental education *for* the environment.

Huckle (1991) has explored the nexus between critical theory of education and environmental education. It could be claimed, in fact, that environmental education, with its pedagogy based *in, about* and *for* the environment provides the *action* or *prescription*, through its emphasis on an action-oriented curriculum for social transformation, that Gibson (1986) identifies as missing from critical theory. An environmental perspective also broadens the base of critical theory to include education for ecological sustainability as well as for social transformation. Huckle (1991:43), in linking critical theory and environmental education points education for sustainability along a "broader and difficult road which leads not only to sustainability but also to greater democracy and justice", while critical theory is made 'action-oriented' through developing and expanding its position to embrace 'education for sustainability'. In the end, it is apparent that critical theory and environmental education are moving along similar pathways. In fact, it could be concluded that critical theory and environmental education find conjunction in education *for* the environment. Huckle (1990:54) states that education for the environment should be:

> ... a shared speculation with pupils on those forms of technology and social organisation which can enable people to live in harmony with one another and the natural world. It should empower pupils so that they can democratically transform society.

He suggests that closing of the gaps between pupils and teachers, theory and practice, and schools and community, through collaborative community projects offers a means for education *for* the environment. The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is one such collaborative project that seeks to apply critical perspectives to education and to exemplify education *for* the environment. When scrutinised in the light of recent thinking about public health and education for health promotion, also, it may offer even wider possibilities for 'closing the gaps'.

2.3 PUBLIC HEALTH AND HEALTH PROMOTION

A key development in the field of public health in recent years has been the emphasis on supportive environments for health. This was recognised formally in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, a 1986 World Health Organisation initiative. This 'new Public Health' is a "newly conceptualised and politicised dimension of health", according to Colquhoun and Robottom (1990:110), which views public health as "a movement relating traditional public health, environmental health and social health by a social movement that emphasises primary intervention and participation" (Lennie and Owen, 1989:xi). The Ottawa Charter stresses five action areas for health promotion:

* building healthy public policy;

* creating supportive environments for health;

* strengthening community action;

* developing personal skills; and

* re-orienting health services.

A key element of this new thinking about public health has been the shift from the predominant and heavily individualistic orientation of health of the 1970s to a broader

agenda recognising the social nature of health. A second key change in this reconceptualisation of public health, sometimes referred to as the 'new new public health', has emerged as a development of the first and recognises an 'ecological' base for public health. This 'ecological public health', writes Hancock (1992:3), acknowledges that there is an increasing need to address "the quality and sustainability of the physical environment and ultimately the global ecosystem". However, other writers have extended even this view of the relationship between health and ecology, to include an even greater integrative ecological perspective - one that respects traditional knowledge of relationships between humans and nature, that has the idea of intergenerational equity enshrined, that supports holistic views of self. Money (1992:301) refers to these as 'shamanic' components and argues that "the shamanic vision may soon be seen to be essential" if the concept of planetary health as a prerequisite for human health is to be realised. The Sundsvall Statement - A Call to Action (1991) provides the cornerstone of this ecological development. This Sundsvall Statement on Supportive Environments for Health (1991:3-4) has two basic principles:

First, *equity* must be a basic priority in creating supportive environments for health, releasing energy and creative power by including all human beings in this unique endeavour. Second, public action for supportive environments for health must recognise the *interdependence* of all living beings and must manage all natural resources taking into account the needs of coming generations.

These key changes in the field of health promotion since the mid 1980's recognise the importance of 'context' for health and give recognition to the issues of equity and sustainability. They also emphasise the links between health and the environment. As Hancock (1992:3) writes:

> The environmental movement has recognised that the health effects of environmental problems carry great social and political punch, while the health sector has increasingly recognised the health consequences of local and global environmental problems.

The implications of this new thinking for health education are considerable. Fundamentally, it means that schools "would aim to 'practice' health as part of the overall school setting and activities and not just as an activity called 'health education'"

(Kickbush,1989:22). This approach recognises that health is created in the settings of everyday life and that schools are one of those settings. Schools then need to become 'health promoting schools'. Consequently, all participants who function and interact in the school - children, teachers, administrators, ancillary staff, parents and other community members - are all creators of the school context. Therefore, they are responsible for creating the social and physical environments and the policies and practices of the school. Thus, the commitment of the whole school, as a system, is needed to implement effective health education. As Colquhoun and Robottom (1990:110) have stated:

> No longer will the individualistic, behavioural, lifestyle approach to health education suffice. Health is about more than individual behaviour change - social, economic and political issues need to be encountered in the curriculum.

These are necessary components if the social, environmental, political and action-oriented principles of the Ottawa Charter and the Sundsvall Statement are to be implemented.

The consequences of this paradigm shift towards education for health promotion in schools are profound. Obviously, there has to be a restructuring of power relations away from the status quo which maintains traditional hierarchies, in order for this radical change to occur. The principles of health promotion are predicated on the notion of community and personal action for creating healthful change in just and sustainable ways. Therefore, it is a social imperative that schools devolve power to the school community if these principles are to be enacted. At the same time they must seek to empower all members using processes that promote support and participation.

2.4 THE HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOL CONCEPT

An example of a collaborative community approach that has the potential for linking critical theory of education, education *for* the environment and the new health promotion orientation of health education is Healthy Schools. This involves a process that seeks to empower school participants - students, teachers, parents and the wider community - in making changes to the school environment. This concerns all aspects of that environment - the social, political, physical and personal elements - in order to create

healthful places and to encourage life-long actions in health promotion, environmental change and participatory democracy.

This initiative is seen in the context of the recent paralleling of health education and environmental education. Colquhoun and Robottom (1990:109) refer to the development of a shared agenda and a shared discourse as a trend at both the level of language and of policy for these two areas of education which demonstrates their commonalities and their "increasingly political discourses". The descriptors of a Healthy School Community developed by the Australian National Network for Healthy School Communities (see next page) clearly illustrate this.

As outlined, the recent adoption of the five principles of the Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion and the Sundsvaal Statement promoting social justice and ecological sustainability are public health initiatives having world-wide acceptance. The international recognition by environmental educators of education *for* the environment as legitimate environmental education also indicates this common shift from the "pervasive ideology of individualism" (Colquhoun and Rowbottom,1990:109) to a "socially critical curriculum which emphasises the political nature of recent trends in both health and environment". This provides a context for linking education, health and the environment.

Fundamental to health promotion, environmental education and the health promoting schools concept is the notion of participatory democracy through personal and community empowerment. The Queensland Healthy Schools Network and this pilot project, the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, aim to exemplify this.

The Queensland Healthy Schools Working Party was formed in 1992. This is an intersectoral group made up of teachers, parents, education administrators, tertiary educators, officers of the Department of Education and representatives of a number of non-government organisations, including The Cancer Fund and the National Heart Foundation. There is also a number of allied non-participating members whose interests range from road safety to playground design. This working party has overseen the development of a project called 'Establishing a Healthy Schools Network' which seeks

A Healthy School Community

Participation Skills Policy Services Environment

- values learning
- empowers community members with ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies
- works collaboratively with agreed goals
- works with the broader community and is supported by it
- functions as a model and training ground for active community participation
- accomodates diversity
- enables all people to achieve their fullest potential for healthy learning and living
- develops the skills and confidences for full participation in the community
- teaches people to think critically and analytically about social and health issues
- encourages people to think globally, act locally
- accords health an important place in school curriculum
- provides a school climate which supports personal and social development
- fosters good communication and social relationships
- delivers efficient and humane educational services to meet needs

funded through the
National Health Promotion Program

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to promote the concept of health promoting schools in Queensland and to support initiatives. The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is one in two schools in Queensland which are pilot projects.

As indicated earlier, the notion that schools are settings in which health may be enhanced or diminished is fundamental to the concept of health promoting schools, or Healthy Schools, as the Queensland version is known. The setting includes more than the 'usual' business of schools, the curriculum that is explicitly taught to children and the physical environment in which it is located. The 'hidden' curriculum of the school is also examined, and in so doing is made 'explicit' and open to review and change. The operational practices of the school are seen as part of the setting, as are the relationships between the various stakeholders - children, parents, teaching and other staff. As Nutbeam et al. (1993:221) write in the report on Goals and Targets for Australia's Health in the Year 2000 and Beyond:

> It has become apparent that information and understanding in the classroom can be either reinforced and supported, or completely undermined by what happens outside the classroom... The example provided by adults in the school, the health and safety of the physical environment, and the organisation and management of the school are increasingly recognised as significantly influencing students' attitudes and behaviors.

All these factors have an impact on the health of the school community. As MacLeod states (1993:3) "this new view of health recognises the health needs of children and the crucial role of a supportive environment".

A basic premise of current thinking about health promotion is that it requires a commitment to participatory democracy and democratic decision making in order to empower individuals and communities to take actions that truly promote individual, social and environmental health. This orientation recognises that health outcomes are essentially linked to control and power mechanisms. Consequently, the process of community development assumes high importance. MacLeod (1993:1) also comments:

> Community development involves working with people to develop strength and confidence to address practical issues. In community

development, control is exercised from the 'bottom up' with people taking control rather than from the 'top down' with imposed control mechanisms.

Health promoting schools require all members of the school community to be involved in decision making. All members need encouragement to take a critical eye to their environment, their own attitudes and behaviours and their assumptions about the world. In these ways, they are addressing and beginning to put into action the principles for health promotion that have been outlined in the Ottawa Charter.

As previously indicated, the Sundsvall Statement on Supportive Environments for Health has added additional dimensions to health promotion principles. The inclusion of a commitment to the principles of sustainable development and equity, both fundamental tenants of education *for* the environment, give real strength to the connections between health education and environmental education. The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is a community based project that has explicitly sought to add these additional elements into its Healthy Schools process, by including a critical environmental education perspective.

2.5 REFORM IN EDUCATION: DEVOLUTION, PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLING

2.51 Devolution

While there has been a reorienting of focus towards the recognition of greater democracy and shared decision making in the pedagogies of environmental education and health education in recent times, there have also been major changes, reflecting these same values, in education generally. This has been occurring at both a systems level and at the level of individual schools. At its most general, this trend appears to be a positive contribution to the call by supporters of the socially critical approach to social theory, for the realignment of social relations along the lines of social transformation. More specifically it provides opportunities for the enactment of environmental education, ecological public health and processes like Healthy Schools.

In Queensland state schools, there has been a continuing and pervasive movement towards the increased participation of parents in the decision making processes of schools, particularly since the release of the 1990 'Focus on Schools' initiative of the

Department of Education. This had gathered momentum in 1993, as evidenced by the public release of a television campaign encouraging parents to become actively involved in their children's education. The move towards school devolution (called variously 'school-based management' or 'school-centred education') is a key motivating force at the heart of these changes.

However, while these changes appear on the surface to be forward thinking, a critical examination of the literature regarding school-based, power sharing practices indicates that the principles of power sharing may not offer the 'big leap forward' that many may wish for. Doubt has been cast on there being any significant move towards more participatory management of schools or, consequently, towards any greater degree of democratic practice in these institutions.

Vincent (1993) has provided a critique of the participatory movements in schools in Great Britain since the 1970s, which has lessons for these processes in Australia in the 1990s. She has examined, particularly, the 'community school' movement in relation to devolution with changes focussed on the need to redistribute power within the education system. Underpinning this power sharing ideal is the desirability for community participation in a fully participative democracy. Vincent (1993:228), in summing up the claims of the social democratic advocates, states that they believe only the process of participation and "involvement in the management and organisation of state institutions... allow citizens to develop a sense of 'ownership' of organisations previously perceived as alienating and/or patronising". She equates the growth of the community school movement as the educational example of theories of community participation, parallelling the community development projects for urban renewal of the early 1970s.

However, Vincent provides two criticisms of these kinds of initiatives in participation: first, that attempts to increase participation may prove illusory in substance; and second, that moves to introduce participatory processes are often motivated by a wish to legitimate the more general action of the institution concerned. Community participation in decision making, it appears, is often restricted by power-holders who allowed it to operate only in those directions they deemed acceptable. The weight of evidence is that

actual transfers of power are rare. This is illustrated by the following comments from Vincent (1993:229):

> attempts to give parents more say in their child's education and/or whole school issues have in fact been concerned with promoting a deeper understanding of the school's organisation and curriculum amongst parents in the hope of co-opting their support and thereby easing the smooth running of the institution .

This is further reinforced by Morris (1992), the president of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, who gave an insightful critique of the co-opting of parent support for "easing the smooth running of the institution" when she stated that:

> It is (the) capacity to be part of the making of decisions about the nature of the school and its programs which is increasingly seen as important by parents, not the responsibility for handling the jobs around the place that school systems don't factor in to their staffing schedules.

Smyth (1992) also parallels these findings. He comments that the 'deception of school decentralisation' has the effect of centralising residues of educational bureaucracies, even as community responsibilities are growing. He claims that "small elite policy-making groups have sloughed off to schools and their communities responsibilities for implementing agenda (called 'guidelines' or 'frameworks') that are decided centrally". He not only reinforces the belief that 'actual transfers of power are rare', but argues that power is actually becoming further *centralised*, whilst devolutionary processes are apparently occurring.

The illusory nature of power sharing is indicated too, in criticisms related to the devolutionary policies, aimed at devolving power and responsibility to individual schools, that is occurring in Queensland at the present time. Burke (1993), on behalf of researchers who reported to the Minister of Education about reforms in Department of Education policy, commented that although current policy was to invert the traditional hierarchical structure of organisational authority and responsibility, this is proving problematical. Their findings indicate that even where an education system actually *desires* to transfer power, adequate resourcing was necessary but apparently lacking. This resourcing was seen as particularly crucial to fund training for all participants in

the education system, for staff and community training and, particularly for principals, as key agents in the change process. Obviously, adequate resourcing for these areas impacts greatly on the ability to create the necessary power transfers to the community.

Forming coalitions within school communities, and between schools and the wider community, around the issues of power and hierarchy, may, then, be difficult. Three reasons appear as to why this may be so. First, the devolutiony processes may serve to concentrate power into the hands of an increasingly small elite policy-making group, denying at first base, a wide canvassing of issues and solutions to educational questions. Second, where there is a move to relocate power bases, this may be particularly proscribed - institutions may encourage participation only in those areas in which *they* feel it is appropriate. Those in power positions still firmly hold the agenda. Third, there may not be the resourcing commitment, to educate all parties involved in the organisation changes, to ensure that the processes of negotiation, consensus management and consultation, can actually occur. Inevitably, these difficulties with devolution serve to reinforce the status quo.

2.52 Parental Participation

Current educational and political discussion highlights the devolutionary processes that are current at a macro systems level within education. Much of this discussion focuses on the potential role of parents in providing community input into schools and sharing a decision making role with teachers and educational administrators. An examination of current literature, however, reveals the true status of parental participation in schools.

A distinction has been made by a number of authors (Beare 1984; Marsh 1988; Wilson 1991) between 'involvement' and *participation*. Traditionally, there has been considerable 'involvement' in schools for parents, in areas such as tuck-shop, parent evenings, classroom help and the provision of teaching resources. These activities are typically those that have been designed and initiated by the school administration and the staff, or serve the interests of the 'official' organisation for parental involvement, the Parents' and Citizens' Associations, directly for fund-raising or cost-cutting purposes. Involvement can be seen as essentially a 'one-way' process, and in many situations is directly related to a parents' concern for, or interest in their individual child's academic

or social development, and how the child may 'fit in' to a relatively unchanging school setting.

In contrast, Marsh (1988:82) refers to 'participation' as "a partnership between parents and school staff in various domains of decision making, including curriculum". Participation reflects a much stronger role for parents as it implies a two-way exchange of ideas and initiatives, with joint planning, sharing and control of school-level decisions. According to Wilson (1991) it also requires as a prerequisite, a concern for the whole school program, as well as a commitment to their child's education. Participation is more concerned, then, with creating change to the institutions and processes of the school itself, rather than having a focus on individual children's concerns and interests.

Marsh has developed a parent participation continuum (Figure 2.1) which illustrates the range of activities in which parents can be involved in schools. This ranges from a set of 'passive' activities to 'active' ones. However, the processes that encourage or discourage involvement, from passive to active, are part of the institutionalised operation of schools, not merely a matter of preferred choice by parents *between* activities. Existing practices in schools may well serve to limit the kinds of involvement and participation by parents. As Delgado-Gaitan (1991:43) states:

> Conventional school activities that have been institutionalised to involve parents in limited ways tend to relegate all the power to the institution and have usually ignored the needs of groups... who are unfamiliar with the school's expectations.

Marsh (1988:82) comments that while parent inputs into school-level decision making have been high-lighted in recent times, it seems that few successful developments have occurred in school communities. This is in spite of there being a "critical view of the power of teachers described in the often-repeated phrase that education is too important to our children to be left solely to the professionals". He comments further that the overall impact of parents on the schooling process in Australia appears to have been very slight, in spite of efforts by education systems and individual schools, administrators and teachers.

Passive — Active

Reporting children's progress to parents	Special events for parents	Parents as fund-raisers	Parent education activities	Parents assisting in non-instruction activities	Parents assisting teachers in instruction	Parents as decision-makers
Home visits Home–school notebooks Parent–teacher conferences Telephone calls Call-in times for parents Newsletters Take-home announcements	Picnics Working bees Art shows Concerts and plays Open days Parent evenings Assemblies	Tuckshops and canteens Bottle drives	In-service days for parents Seminars on values education Classroom observation Information evenings	Organising sports days, quiz nights Supervising students on excursions Liaising with local businesses for work-experience opportunities for students Researching library topics Preparing art materials	Teaching various skills to children (e.g. pottery, horse-riding) Guest speakers Leaders on school camps Preparing teaching materials Maintaining student records	Chairing subcommittees on staff selection and curriculum Members of the school council

Figure 2.1: Parent Participation Continuum
(from Marsh, C.,1988, *Spotlight on School Improvement* Sydney: University of New South Wales p 90).

The following section provides a further examination of participatory process in schools, particularly in relation to the 'community school movement', and the wider social purposes of schooling.

2.53 Community Schooling

The proponents of community education, states Vincent, argue that a key benefit of parents and other members of the community participating in the management of schools, is that it can act to lessen the isolation of the school from its local community. Brough (1993:2), a parent and community representative on the Board of Teacher Registration, Queensland, illustrated this sense of isolation when she commented that parents often feel alienated from the work of school and that:

> Many of us are locked in our own childhood, where the school principal was the figure of authority, and where the role of schools and teachers was not questioned.

However, others believe that schools need greater participation by community members, not just to reduce their isolation from the community, but for a much larger social purpose. This is to enable schools to respond better to the need to develop democratic citizens. This reinforces the view of the school as a 'microcosm of the wider community' and as a model and training ground for its future citizens. However as Davis (1992) has stated, schools are generally:

> less democratic than the community at large, which appears to be more dynamic, more diverse and more open to change than are most schools.

This reflects the comments of Greenberg (1991:61) who records that "democratic practice occurs just often enough each week so you can't say it's utterly unheard of by the teacher". Davis further contends that until parents become full participants and decision-makers in their children's schools, there is little chance that children will be given much freedom from the regimes, regulations and rules that prevent them from becoming involved in school decisions and activities that affect their lives. As the main advocates for their children, parents need to participate democratically for democratic change so that their children may live democratically in their schools.

Considering the earlier discussion regarding the shortcomings of devolutiony processes that are 'top-down', systemic processes. Davis advocates for parents, particularly, to ensure that power sharing in schools also commences from the 'bottom-up' as 'grassroots' initiatives in schools. She states that local actions by parents, teachers and children to create changes and to realign the power relationships in schools is vital given that the evidence is that actual transfers of power are rare.

Davis (1993) argues for greater parental participation in schools, not only to support devolutionary initiatives but, more importantly so that schools *can* act as models and training grounds in democratic values and practices. It is imperative, then, that parents and the wider community be actively involved inside schools - not just in tuckshops, at fetes and assisting teachers with classroom tasks, but fundamentally involved with the policies, planning and organisational structures which impact upon the 'lived experience' of schools. Preston and Symes (1992:242) articulate similar views of the reality and possibility of schooling. They argue that the:

> oppressive regime of schooling, which reflects the oppressive nature of society, needs to be confronted, unravelled and deconstructed and replaced with a regime like that of the emancipatory one... which recognises that schooling is a political act which cannot be separated from its social functions without presenting a false impression for all those involved. As an instrument of social advancement, schooling is deeply flawed... the modernisation of society which school is supposed to have assisted has failed.

As these writers indicate, community education has been exposed as a legitimation strategy of the state where reformist approaches have proved illusory and actual transfers of power are rare. Vincent (1993:229) remarks that the literature on home-school relations generally reaches a similar conclusion, in that "parents are still marginalised in discussion of whole-school or local educational issues (and that) this reflects a profound imbalance in parent-professional knowledge and power".

Morris, quoted earlier in relation to the legitimation process of many parent-school activities, comments further that the model of school management that her organisation (the Australian Council of State School Organisations) supports is that which endorses a view of parents as active partners in schooling, not merely as customers. Parent

organisations are not looking for control of schools. What is claimed, she states, is a complementary role for parents, where both parent and school staff learn together and reflect together on what is happening in schools. In this way, she says, community support for the work of schools can be developed, with increased community regard for the people who work in them. Morris (1992:9) continues:

> ... Schools need governing bodies which have real power in the area of educational policy, but which have fair and active representation of all the players in the school community. In this way, school communities can develop collective responsibility for decisions about the future of the schools, which will meet the needs of all of the students... The maintenance of constructive dialogue between educators and parents and the building of a genuine partnership between the home and the school, provide the best hope our children have of an education which is challenging, but relevant. It is the only way that we can be sure that all young Australians will have a chance to be part of creating our future.

Initiatives that provide parents with information and support so that they can approach a school from a more confident, informed position would constitute a step forward in this direction, with parents becoming more closely involved with the functioning of schools. However, initiatives that are of their very nature participatory with all members of the school community involved, offer even greater potential for a real transfer of power to school communities, while at the same time, practising and exercising the democratic processes of participation and collaborative decision making. The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project that is the basis of this study is one such initiative. It derives its perspectives from critical theory, critical environmental education (education *for* the environment) and from ecological perspectives in public health. As such it offers the school community a process for change that is innovative, value-driven and participative.

2.6 CONCLUSION

The critical theorists of education have issued a challenge for social change, and have identified the school as a key factor in both resistance to change and as having a part to play in the processes of restructuring society. Trainer and Huckle as socially critical theorists within environmental education take up the themes set by Giroux, Apple and others and provide a framework for social change through education *for* the environment. Education initiatives that link students, teachers, their families and the

community through participatory democratic processes are seen as having the potential to be socially transformative.

The notion of seeking a 'shared discourse' between health education and environmental education has also been commented upon. The need to embrace the necessary interrelatedness of individual and environment, within the context of social, political and cultural ideologies has been outlined. The Healthy Schools approach is one such initiative that has strengthened the concept of a shared agenda and discourse for health education and environmental education. Healthy Schools can be further strengthened in forging links between health education and environmental education by more overtly reflecting the two basic principles of supportive environments for health as proposed at the Sundsvall Conference - equity and sustainability.

The Healthy Schools approach has the potential to create change in schools, through bringing the school and community together, at a time when there is a concerted move to devolve power to schools. An examination of the literature regarding power sharing initiatives, though, indicates that devolution has been of limited success when it is generated from the top. However, where there is a desire for change from the 'grassroots', that is, parents advocating for themselves and their children to create change, the prospects for effective power sharing may be enhanced. A school may better reflect the processes and structures of the community, and at the same time, create change by being better able to become "a model and training ground for a healthy future". Huckle's view of education that "is lifelong, community based and enabling... and develops a wide range of practical, intellectual and social skills which allow people to live co-operatively and peacefully with one another" perhaps will be realised through participatory action research projects such as the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research design of the evaluation of a participatory action research project, the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. It describes the methodology, method and techniques used in this evaluation. As this evaluation forms part of a current participatory action research project, its findings will inform and improve ongoing cycles in the action research process. This evaluation uses qualitative evidence gathered from focus group discussions, individual interviews, public documents such as school newsletters, policy documents and prospectuses and some personal documents related to the research, including diary entries, notes of meetings, commentary on events and records of conversations. These documents have been compiled into a case record and appear as Volume 2 of this report.

Involvement in this study, particularly through the interview processes, has the capacity to lead to further reflection, understanding and action by the researcher as well as by the participants. In this regard, there is potential not only that the findings will assist in evaluating the participatory processes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, but that involvement of the participants in the interview sessions may itself foster action learning regarding the processes and purposes of evaluation. As Stevenson and Lennie (1992:557) discuss, "action learning, through action research methods, enables people to investigate and understand their own situation, thus empowering them to change their social environment". Thus, participation in this evaluative research may enhance further the commitment of the participants to the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project and to evaluation as an integral part of this.

3.1 THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to record, document, reflect on and critically analyse the participative processes by which the Ashgrove State School community has sought to bring about change. It also involves an examination of the power sharing relationships, with

particular respect to the participation of parents and their role in decision making in the school. Specifically, the study seeks to understand eight questions. These are:

1. What are the motivations for participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project?

2. What mitigates against initial participation in decision making?

3. What perceptions of the participatory process are held by participants in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project?

4. What are the perceived barriers to the process?

5. What have been identified as important factors for maintaining and building momentum for participation in the project?

6. What evidence is there of a shift of balance in decision making within the school community?

7. What are the opportunities for expanding participatory processes within the school context?

8. What can be learned about participatory action research that assists the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project and may inform other schools and communities about the processes?

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

The critical research orientation of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project has been outlined in Chapter 1. It lies within the critical research paradigm and uses participatory action research to examine, challenge and change existing practices and processes of the school in democratic and empowering ways. Carson (1990) notes that critically reflective action research is set apart from ordinary problem-solving, or

'arrested action research', because of the spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

This evaluation constitutes part of the reflective stage of the overall participatory action research project (Figure 3.1). It is imperative, then, that the research orientation of this evaluation is compatible with the overall participatory action research. A mismatch of methodology between the participatory action research process and this evaluative research would make for a disunity between this phase of the action research process and the whole process. Hence, the process of evaluation must demonstrate a dialectical unity with the democratic principles of participatory action research, the empowering and democratic ideals of the Healthy Schools process, and the objectives of a socially critical agenda for health promotion and environmental education.

Thus, this study is conducted by and for those who are parties to the action. It is not research and evaluation done by an 'outsider' which, state Carr and Kemmis (1986,159):

> ... may interpret and inform practices, but does not constitute them, has limited power to transform them, and rarely lives with the consequences of any actual transformations that occur.

Wadsworth (1991) writes that evaluation involves actually conducting research on other people's evaluations of things, to identify what people think, why, and their preferences or possible future options. These options can then be evaluated and subsequently enacted. As the new enacting relies on the same people, this is all the more reason for their participation in the evaluation.

3.21 Open Inquiry Evaluation

An 'open inquiry' approach has been selected for this evaluative research. In contrast to 'audit review' evaluation which involves the researchers in comparing what they have done with what they expected to have done, open inquiry evaluation is described as 'change and improvement-oriented inquiry'. It asks about the value of current practice in terms of 'descriptions of the world' which have not yet been made conscious, but about which there may be strong 'intuitive feelings'. Wadsworth (1991:5) continues:

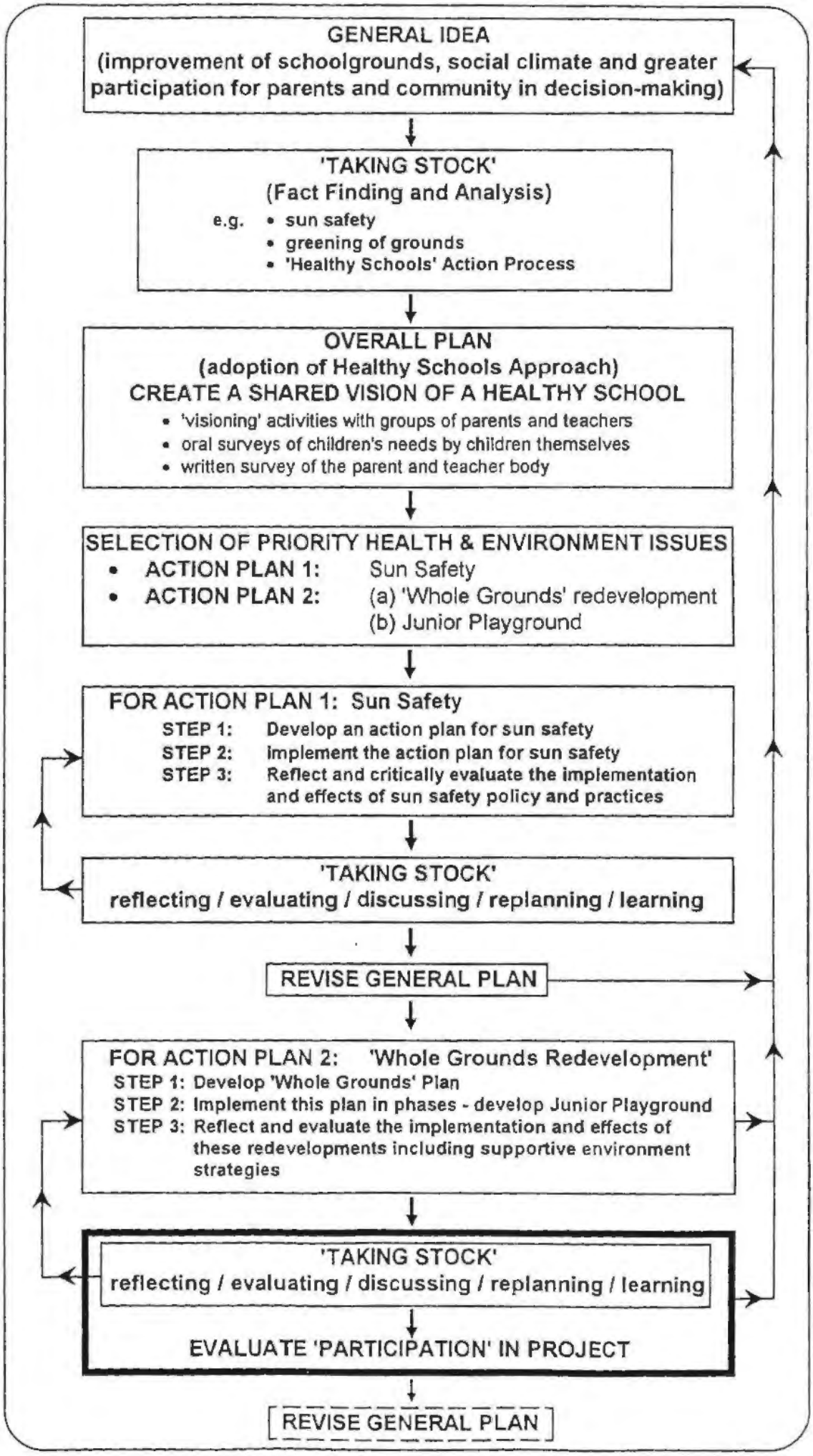

FIGURE 3.1 The Asharove Healthy School Environment Project Research Process

> ... any evaluative research commences with observing a discrepancy between an 'is' and an 'expectation' - a 'problematising' of experience, where you hold an image of the world about which you have already decided the value, up against a description of the world-as-it-is-here-and-now.

However, she stresses that these discrepancies are not necessarily about things that 'need to be fixed' and that it is possible to have "expected the worst and done better - or expected a good outcome and noticed an even better one!"

This form of evaluation calls for a process of thinking which is creative, flexible and systematic, only in hindsight. It challenges participants to name feelings, articulate hunches, explore ideas and express concerns. As Wadsworth (1991:29) illustrates:

> The aim of this kind of evaluation is *not* to be constrained by existing conclusions and current theory or established goals or objectives or targets, but to ask the previously-unasked, observe the previously-unnoticed and consider the value and relevance of ideas and societal developments that may at first appear of no relevance whatsoever.

Thus, open inquiry evaluation is consistent with the processes of participatory action research. In fact, as stated earlier, it is *part of* the action research process that leads the inquirer and the members of the group involved in this to reflect on their past actions and to use these to inform future actions. It is evident that an open inquiry approach is a most appropriate evaluative method for examining the participatory processes that are part of action research within the critical 'transformative' paradigm. This is so because it seeks specifically to uncover and to illuminate the perceptions, biases, aspirations and values of the participants in order to change them.

3.22 Limitations of the Open Inquiry Approach

The open inquiry approach to evaluating this action research project is appropriate in that it increases the chances of problem-solving outcomes and the chances for improvement in areas identified as important. It also assists innovation, creativity and dynamism amongst those involved in the evaluation.

However, it also is an approach that has some identified weaknesses. The first is that a problem-focus may overlook important matters that no one has yet identified as a problem. Second, it may not be systematic and comprehensive. Third, it involves uncertainty, suspension of judgement, lack of clarity, and possibly apparent 'irrationality', disagreement and conflict.

In order to overcome or ameliorate these weaknesses, Wadsworth (1991:42) indicates that close communication with the critical reference group, the group whom the effort, activity or service is for, is demanded. 'Insider' research ensures this. To secure systematic review, constant clarification of the problem-solving evaluation is necessary to steer the evaluation in the right direction. It is also necessary to tolerate uncertainty, to move to some level of agreement and to treat what is possible as provisional.

3.23 Evaluation for Whom? - The Critical Reference Group

As has been stated, this evaluation is research by and for the people who are seeking to create change in the school environment - specifically the parents and teachers who comprise the Grounds Committee for the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. In effect, they shape the evaluation by focusing on *their* values, interests, concerns and purposes. Thus, this evaluation is a participatory and democratic process, aimed to ensure a user-appropriate outcome. An open inquiry approach increases the chances that the critical reference group - through their participation in the evaluation - both determine the 'descriptions of the world' which are the basis for the evaluation, and also are able to judge the value of these images or descriptions. Furthermore, as the evaluation is intended to contribute to the improvements, changes, and developments of the Healthy Schools project, the chances are increased of gaining understanding which will assist its future actions.

3.24 Role of the Researcher

This researcher is a member of the critical reference group, too. As a parent of children at Ashgrove State School and as co-facilitator of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, she is working with her project colleagues and other familiar members of the school community. This is 'insider research' which places the researcher in a 'naturalistic' setting, which as Guba and Lincoln (1981:130) state, makes

the researcher both "interpersonally and contextually interactive... (which) gives rise not to neutrality, but to a profound responsiveness and interactivity".

The result for an inquiry such as this is frequently - and optimally - a situation in which respondents do not adopt the constructs of the inquirer. However, in the case where the inquirer is of the critical reference group, respondents' constructs may well be very similar. This naturalistic 'insider' approach, according to Guba and Lincoln (1981:131) encourages respondents:

> to relate their histories, anecdotes, experiences, perspectives, retrospectives, introspections, hopes, fears, dreams, and beliefs in their own natural language, based on their own personal and cultural understandings. The naturalistic inquirer's responsiveness not only calls this uniqueness forth: it is exactly what he (sic) wishes to have.

The naturalistic approach means that the researcher is out and amongst people, where they are, in their own settings and asks 'grounded' questions, relating to their problems, needs and perceptions, not abstract hypothetical ones. The naturalistic researcher also makes or draws on written records which are made systematically, carefully, rigorously and as fully as is warranted by the situation. Grounded questions are also asked of any written materials and documents. As Wadsworth (1991:16) comments:

> We ask the same grounded questions as we would of the people who wrote them. We read the material ourselves - we get as close to the experience of them as we can.

Regarding the interpretation of what is heard and what is written, the grounded researcher checks carefully what is heard - not assuming too quickly that it is understood by them, probing further and being sceptical of any assumptions and conclusions that are made.

3.25 Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Issues of trustworthiness or credibility with this study could be seen as problematical due to the lack of objective distance from the research that is inherent in 'insider research'. However, McLaughlin (1986:187) puts an alternative view, which is that the study has the potential to provide a depth of understanding that is often lacking in other

research approaches. This latter view is subscribed to by the researcher. Guba and Lincoln (1989:236-243) comment that credibility issues, in what they refer to as 'fourth generation evaluation' that is part of 'new paradigm' research such as this, involve the measurement of the evaluation process against criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity.

Trustworthiness of the evaluation is enhanced when *credibility* criteria are applied. The credibility criteria, write Guba and Lincoln, parallel 'internal validity' in more conventional research. They represent the correspondence between the constructed realities of respondents and the reconstructions attributed to them. Guba and Lincoln suggest that credibility can be increased by a number of techniques that are well recognised by those engaging in social research. These include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity and member checking. It is the contention of this researcher, that these techniques have been used continuously throughout the action research process and that they ensure the credibility of this evaluation.

McLoughlin (1986), in exploring issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research, describes the usefulness of triangulation. She describes this as a research strategy that provides support for a finding by showing that independent measures agree with it or at least do not contradict it. She notes that sources of data may include the testimony of active members, testimony of inactive members, testimony of children or analysis of documents. These kinds of sources of data have been used in this evaluation. Furthermore, different people with different roles have been sources of data, too - the school principal, teachers and parents. Importantly, there has been triangulation with another researcher - the co-facilitator - who has been parallelling this research in her own research project. These strategies are identified by McLaughlin as important in order to avoid or reduce bias.

Guba and Lincoln, however, avoid discussion of triangulation as a credibility check as they claim it has too positivist an implication. They concede, though, that where the idea of triangulation is useful to researchers, they should consider that member-checking processes should be dedicated to verifying that *constructions* are those that have been

offered by respondents and that triangulation should be thought of as referring to cross-checking specific data items of a factual nature. For this study, feedback from participants, both in regards to the data collected and the constructions derived from the data have been obtained as a matter of course due to the commitment to the processes of open inquiry within participatory action research.

Another set of criteria that Guba and Lincoln discuss in relation to enhancing the trustworthiness of evaluation research, are the *authenticity* criteria. These concern the 'fairness', or the extent to which different constructions and their underlying value structures are solicited and honoured within the evaluation process. These different constructions must be presented, clarified, checked (as in the member-checking process), and taken into account in a balanced and even-handed way. Guba and Lincoln claim that there are two techniques for achieving fairness. The first involves seeking wide coverage of potential stakeholders and seeking their constructions. The first of these has been done as part of this evaluation, whereby the perspectives of the school principal, teachers and parents have been sought. The omission of children's views in this evaluation derives from the limited role that children have played in the action research process itself. This is considered and discussed in later parts of this report. The second is the open negotiation of recommendations and the agenda for subsequent action. This latter strategy is beyond the possible time frame and scope of this study. However, it is the intention of the researcher to submit the findings from this evaluation to discussion and negotiation with the participants. Informally, of course, this has already been occurring as part of the due process of the participatory action research.

3.3 RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

This section outlines the data-gathering techniques that were used for this open inquiry evaluation of the participatory processes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. These were:

* synergetic focus group discussions;

* individual indepth interviews;

* published written documents and

* extracts of personal diary entries, notes and records of conversations.

3.31 Synergetic Focus Group Interviews

An appropriate participatory tool for obtaining in-depth information and feed-back is the focus group. Stevenson and Lennie (1992:557) comment that this method, which has been widely used in market research, has recently been recognised as a tool in relation to health education. Basch (1987:436) states that:

> ... understanding the target group's perspective is integral to achieve a key goal of health education - empowerment - and focus groups are an appropriate method for understanding and developing sensitivity towards those we serve.

Basch provides several advantages of focus groups over individual interviews. These include: the potential for increased interaction between respondents; the impact of group pressure in inhibiting misleading information; the reduction in time and cost for group interviews. Ramirez and Shepherd (1988) also note that focus groups allow participants to give multiple answers or to provide answers which researchers may not have considered. It would seem, too, that the potential for action learning amongst the participants of the focus groups is considerable. This results not only from the review and reflection that the evaluation offers but also from the dialogue and dynamics of the focus group discussion itself. As Russell and Lidstone (1993:2) state "each individual is exposed to the ideas of the others and submits his or her ideas for the consideration of the group". Therefore, the group processes of focus group discussion can play an important role in engendering change.

With focus group discussions, write Russell and Lidstone (1993:4), moderators can operate along a continuum of 'openness' which may range from those with firm moderation to those with silent moderation. In the first, the role of the moderator can be described as having the responsibility of ensuring that the group stays on task and that the discussion stays within relevant limits. On the other hand, focus groups with silent moderation allow maximum freedom for the participants to volunteer those aspects of the topic that are of importance to them. The emphasis is, therefore, placed firmly

on the participants. This latter allows maximum *synergism*, or interplay of ideas, between participants and is the form used for the two focus group discussions in this study.

However focus groups do have limitations, according to Stevenson and Lennie. These include: poor generalisability, the need for caution in evaluation and the influence of the facilitator and other participants. However, in this evaluation, the focus groups were drawn from the members of the school community whose ideas this evaluation has explicitly sought. As well, silent moderation was used. Other methods for collecting evaluative data were also relied upon enabling the results from these discussions to be put into a wider data-gathering context.

3.32 Individual Interviews

Five individual interviews were conducted for this study. These were with the co-facilitator of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, the school principal, a teacher actively involved with the project, a teacher who had moderate involvement and a non-classroom teacher who was, therefore, not directly affected by the changes occurring in the outdoor environment of the school. As the focus group discussions obtained mainly the views of parents, the individual interviews widened the cross-section of views available to this evaluation, by including mainly teachers and the school principal.

In-Depth Unstructured Interview with a Key Informant

The first of the interviews was with the co-facilitator of the project. This key informant, as well as being initiator and co-facilitator of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, has also been conducting her own parallel research into the Healthy Schools project. She has served throughout this study, consequently, as both a fellow researcher and *critical friend*. Her 'insider' knowledge has assisted in the conceptualisation of this study, in both implicit and explicit ways: she has been joint facilitator of the focus group interviews and has acted as a 'sounding board' for ideas and verified perceptions and interpretations throughout both the study and the project. Her perceptions have been particularly pertinent in understanding matters related to 'participation'. It was felt, also, that this interview could contribute to increasing the 'shared understanding' between the

facilitators, as together they reflected the shared discourse of health promotion and environmental education, the co-facilitator having worked and studied in health promotion, while *this* researcher has a background in education and the environment.

In-depth unstructured interviews aim to gain insight into the perceptions within a situation. In these types of interviews the agenda is loosely structured, with the interviewee essentially determining the structure. In other words, the interview is unstructured from the interviewer's point of view. However, this does not mean that the interviewer has relinquished control. In fact as Powney and Watts (1987:18) comment, it is the interviewer's intention to "help the interviewee express his or her own concerns and interests without feeling unduly hampered". Such an interview is seen as an invitation to a person to explore certain issues and to impose their own structure on the session in collaboration with the interviewer. It must be noted that for this interview there was a *mutual* selection of themes as both the interviewer and respondent roles applied to both researchers. As Bauman and Adair (1992:10) elaborate:

> Respondents are encouraged to talk about a topic that the researcher has selected, but the specific themes, areas, and orders of discussion are determined by the respondents and their perceptions of priorities. The interview is simply a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms. While it tends to be conversational in style, researchers might ask provocative questions or ask respondents to explain their statements, behavior or attitudes.

This form of interview was considered most appropriate for exploring issues pertinent to this action research project because it provided an opportunity to 'uncover' attitudes, feelings, values and concerns that impact upon and shape the project, particularly, in relation to its participatory nature. Obviously, the attitudes, perceptions and values of the key facilitators, in dialogue with each other are particularly valuable to this study.

A criticism of key informant interviews is that the interpersonal relationship which can develop between interviewer and informant may interfere with the objectivity of the informant's reporting. Another, states Keats (1993:20-22) is that the key informant may not reveal the information sought due to issues related to power and marginalisation. However, in the context of evaluative research with and by members of the critical reference group, these criticisms are not particularly relevant. Objectivity is not an issue.

Subjective comments are *exactly* what the interviewer wants. Further, because the informant and the interviewer are both part of the critical reference group, they do possess valuable insights and information - they are not marginal to the group.

In-depth Semi-structured interviews

Dowsett (1986:50) refers to the semi-structured interview as a one-to-one situation "in which the interviewer has a series of topics or issues which they wish to discuss with the interviewee". These are considered to be broad topics rather than a set of standard questions to be replicated in every interview. As Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1990:92) note, semi-structured interviews are modelled more on the unstructured than the structured model, allowing for in-depth examination of people and topics. This was the interview approach that was used for interviewing the school principal and the three teachers.

This approach was chosen for two reasons. First, time constraints were more evident with these respondents. It was felt that some structure would allow for the exploration of key issues without imposing too much on participants' time. A more open interview approach may have meant that the available time had passed before key issues were reached or that their treatment would be superficial. Second, while the respondents were all known to the interviewer, there was some degree of 'reserve' in the relationships and it was felt that semi-structuring could help to alleviate this tentativeness.

While there is more 'control' in the semi-structured interview, it is an approach that still gives the interviewee some power over what occurs in the interview session. There is not a set sequence to addressing the issues and topics and interviewees can move in their own directions as they explore their perceptions, attitudes, values and concerns. The method also gives flexibility to the interviewer who may be able to recognise a comment or gesture that indicates another aspect of the issues being revealed. Hence, this style of interview allows for the exploration of issues that have not previously been 'uncovered'. In the absence of large amounts of time to develop close relationships, or to actually conduct the interviews, the semi-structured interview is a useful method that allows the principles of openness, collegiality and values exploration still to be evidenced.

3.33 Published Documents

For this evaluation, some records have been collected to provide illuminative insights into what has been done and how people think. These include school newsletters, reports and official school documents such as policies and prospectuses. As Bell (1987:53-54) notes, these are primary sources in that they came into existence in the period under research and were deliberately made for the public record.

As Scott (1990:2-3) states, the form of evidence obtained through interviews and questioning have the researcher "contemporaneous and co-present" with the participants. However, with published documents the evidence has already been 'fixed' in some material form which the observer has to 'read'. As Wadsworth (1991) notes these documents are of value when 'interrogated' by the researcher, to examine their implicit purposes, to give insights into current thinking and to highlight 'discrepancy' between how things are and how people want them to be. The collection of published documents that have been used in this evaluation have been purposely utilised in this way, to illustrate aspects of participation that have been revealed through the analysis of data obtained through interview and discussion.

3.34 Personal Diary Entries and Notes

Personal notes, though they form a minor part of this evaluation, have been based on direct observations of and engagement with the experience of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. These 'participant observations' are, as Scott (1990:2-3) states, "always direct, even if the observer records this communication for ease of handling". These notes include: comments on meetings; some reflective diary entries; notes of critical incidents; personal summaries of data used for public purposes; and some conversation records. They also include some unsolicited verbatim records of comments from this researcher's children about events and perceptions of school. All these notes are subject to closed access, but were written, as Scott (1990:15) states, with the "self-conscious intent of informing a wider public". Wadsworth (1991) comments on the value of these forms of record keeping as enabling a comparison between the events or circumstances as described and the reflections on their value relative to their philosophical purposes or objectives. The fact that they have been recorded illustrates the degree of 'valuing' of the events and interactions in relation to the greater purpose

- which is, after all, the purpose of 'evaluation'. As with the published records, these personal documents are used as secondary resources, that is as adjuncts to the data collected through interview.

3.4 THE CONDUCT OF THE STUDY

The previous sections have outlined the research methods, some issues concerning the role of the researcher and the 'trustworthiness' of 'insider' research, and the techniques used in this study. This section describes the conduct of the study, in relation to the following five phases (Figure 3.2).

3.41 Phase 1: 'Taking stock' of the current participatory action research process

In reality, Phase 1 of this study represents part of the on-going evaluation and reflection of the larger participatory action research process, the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, which has been outlined in Chapter 1. As discussed, action research necessitates continuous cycles of reflection on its actions and processes. This study, in effect, has formalised this reflective process, from relatively *ad hoc* reflections and accounts kept by the two facilitators of the project, into a more widely based evaluation of the participatory processes of the project itself. It was felt that the perceptions and reflections of a wider group of members of the school community, particularly those who were actively involved in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, were needed to assess more adequately the project and to give further impetus to its development.

3.42 Phase 2: Negotiating Access and Ensuring Confidentiality

This phase concerns the processes that were employed in order to seek participants for this evaluation and then to provide for confidentiality. As there were three distinct groups of participants - the co-facilitator, the focus group interviewees and the individual interviewees, each group was managed differently and hence will be discussed separately.

As has been mentioned, the co-facilitator was also conducting her own independent, but parallel, evaluation of the project. Both researchers were aware of the value to each other and to the overall project of recording their perceptions about the Healthy Schools

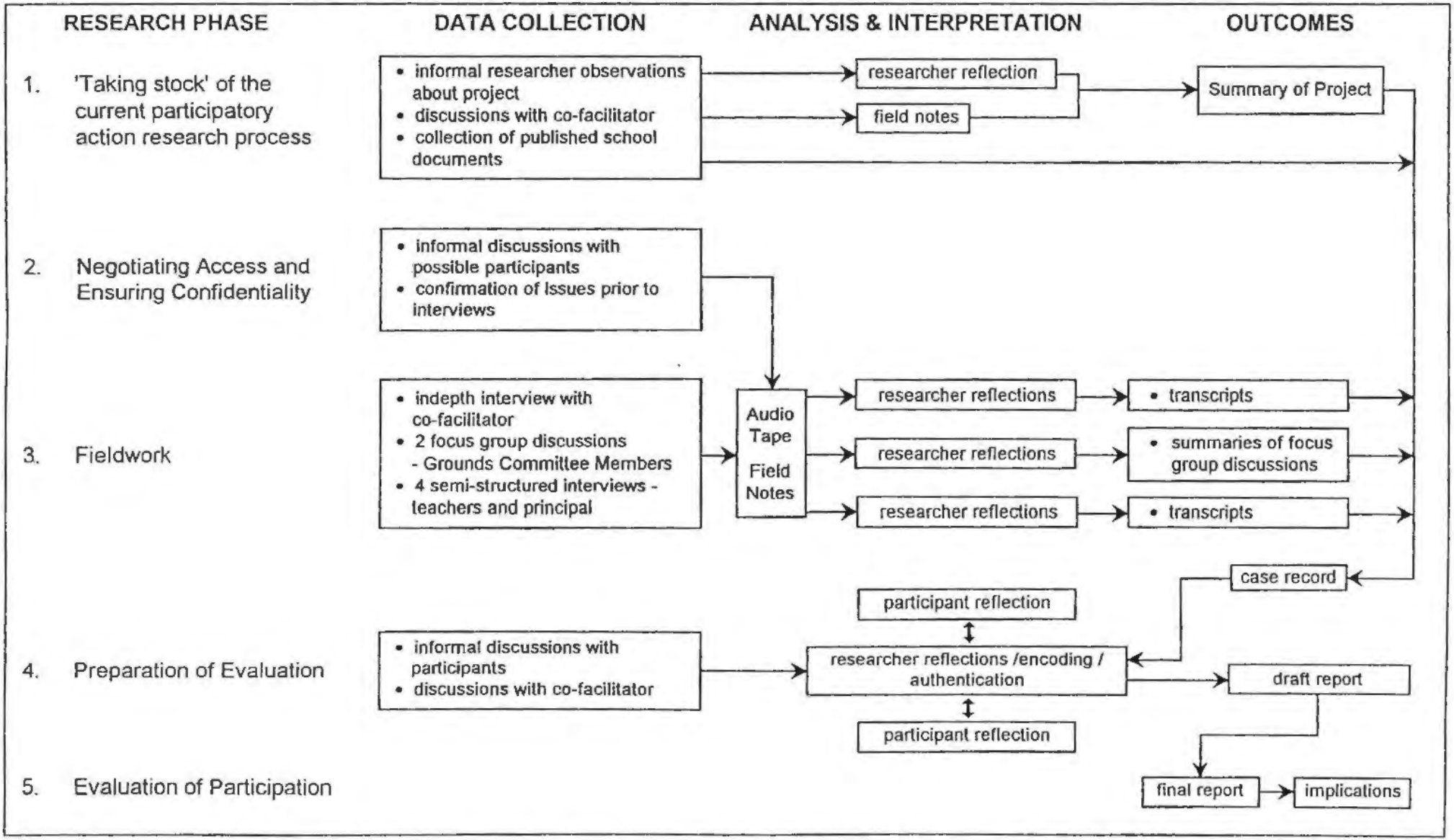

Figure 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Techniques in the Phases of the Research Design

process, therefore access was readily agreed upon. As both facilitators were already openly exposing their views for the public record through co-facilitation of the project, it was acknowledged that views expressed during this evaluation were also for the public record. Confidentiality was not an issue for this participant.

The second group of participants were members of the Grounds Committee, who were notified by letter seeking their willingness to be part of a focus group discussion, for the purposes of evaluating the project. As a school holiday period was underway, the whole of the Grounds Committee was not canvassed. This had the effect of reducing the possible pool of participants, but it was also made easier the organisation for groups to come together, as child care arrangements, always a consideration with Grounds Committee meetings, were less of a problem for the moderators as well as for the discussion participants. The letters of invitation were followed up with personal communication either by phone or direct conversation.

As mentioned, the co-facilitator was also conducting her own evaluation of the participatory action research project. Thus it was decided that the focus group interviews would be conducted jointly, as the same group of people were being drawn upon by both researchers and it was not considered feasible to expect participants to duplicate interview sessions. Regardless, it was felt that the comments from participants would be pertinent to both researchers, and as most interactions with the group, to date, had been conducted jointed, this was a continuation of usual practice.

With the third group of participants, those for individual interviews, each prospective interviewee was approached personally by this researcher. The school principal was approached in the first instance, both to seek his participation and to seek permission to approach teachers for interview. This granted, three teachers were approached and they all agreed to be interviewed. For all participants, except for the co-facilitator, the following conditions applied. These were:

1. All participants would be given pseudonyms, but anonymity could not be guaranteed within the context of a local school.

2. Following the interview, all participants would be able to review either a transcript or summary of the interview to ensure accuracy of reportage.

3. As the research had a number of purposes, including this dissertation, the results of the evaluation were likely to be published and disseminated, beyond the school setting.

4. Upon completion of this study, participants, and the school community at large, would have access to the findings and discussion for comment and these would become part of the reflections/evaluations of the Healthy Schools participatory action research process.

3.43 Phase 3: Collecting the Data

This phase of the study, lasting a five month period, involved data collection. The first data-collecting event, that with the co-facilitator, was conducted and taped in a quiet office. As has been discussed, this was an informal, unstructured conversation-style interview. This reflected the informal relationship between the facilitators and the fact that, in many ways, similar conservations had already taken place as a result of the regular and on-going exchanges that were part of the project management. It was considered by both that imposing a formal interview upon what was essentially an informal relationship would not have been conducive to effective communication. Each participant asked and responded to questions about aspects of the project. These involved the exploration of a broad range of ideas and perceptions about the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, including reasons for becoming involved and the perceived opportunities and barriers to the participatory process, as well as the day-to-day project management. This interview was approximately ninety minutes in length and was partially transcribed and entered into the case record. This appears in Section 2 of Volume 2.

With the focus groups, two opportunities to participate were arranged, resulting in a first focus group of four (as well as the two researchers as moderators) and another with three members. The first of these involved a teacher (male) from the school and three parents (two males and one female). The second involved all parents (one male and two

females). Both focus group sessions were conducted in the home of the co-facilitator and in the context of informal gatherings with drinks and light foods available.

Prior to the focus group sessions, the moderators determined the broad parameters for discussion. These were then presented to the participants in the preamble to the focus group discussions, with each researcher presenting her own discussion areas to the participants in this preamble. It was stressed, however, that discussion could potentially cover wider ground than the particular issues or topics raised by the moderators, as it was desirable to uncover participants' attitudes and feelings about the project and to provoke the group into making reflections to assist their own 'shared understandings'.

After these moderator statements, control of the discussion was passed to the group. The general themes for the co-facilitator revolved around matters such as the participants' views on the purpose of the project, their ideas on what makes the project work and their perceptions of the constraints or difficulties in the process. This overlapped with the areas identified as important to *this* study which concerned the participatory processes themselves. This involved issues such as the motivating reasons for participation in the project and the barriers and opportunities that had emerged to limit or enhance participants' involvement. Participants were also asked to discuss their perceptions of the impact of shared decision making on parents, teachers and others in the school and what further opportunities for participatory processes existed.

As Russell and Lidstone (1993:5) had indicated, the groups began with relative uncertainty, but as the members presented their experiences and perspectives, they found common issues for discussion and debate. As silent moderation had been agreed upon, the moderators did not reenter the discussions after the preamble until it was obvious that the sessions had run their course. At this stage, the sessions were closed. During the discussions, the moderators distanced themselves by engaging in note taking.

The first focus group discussion was taped and lasted eighty minutes. Following the departure of the participants, the researchers then reflected on the session. These reflections were also taped. A summary of this focus group discussion was prepared, with pertinent quotations inserted. The second group interview was taped and also

transcribed, due to availability of research assistance for this task. However, because of the length of this session, over one hour, it was decided not to return the transcript to the participants, but to present a summary, as for the first set of participants. Summaries of both sessions were later returned to participants for validation. Copies of these summaries and the full transcript of the second focus group discussion have been included in Section 2 of the case record.

With the first of the semi-structured individual interviews, that with the school principal, a set of questions was prepared as guides for discussion (see Section 2 of the case record). This set of questions arose from the researcher's reflections based on the focus group interviews and general reflections about participatory decision making in the school. This interview was conducted in the principal's office and was approximately forty minutes in length. As this interview was of a manageable length and as only two copies were needed, this interview was fully transcribed and returned to the principal for validation. It was then added to the case record and appears in Section 2.

The first of the teacher interviews was with Teacher 1 (Cassie), a teacher in the lower primary grades who was also the teacher of this researcher's youngest child. A good rapport had been established throughout the year with this teacher. Although not a fully active participant in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, this teacher did contribute to the process by her involvement in some group planning sessions and was a conduit for information and feedback between the teachers most affected by the grounds redevelopment and the Grounds committee.

The interview followed similar themes to those discussed with the principal. These discussion questions (in Section 2 of the case record), provided a loose structure to the interview and were shown to the teacher prior to the start. This interview was conducted in the teacher's classroom after school and was taped. Some minor interruptions occurred. The interview lasted about twenty minutes, was tape recorded, transcribed, returned to the teacher for validation then entered into the case record (see Section 2).

Teacher 2 (Katrina) is one of the two teachers who is actively involved in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project (the other teacher was present at the first focus group session). Katrina is also a parent of children in the school. Consequently, her perspectives on the participatory processes are unique in this study, representing both teacher and parent views.

This interview was conducted after school in an empty store room and some minor interruptions occurred. The interview lasted about forty minutes and followed a similar pattern to that of Teacher 1, with the same general questions being asked. This interview was also tape recorded, transcribed and returned to the teacher for validation and then entered into Section 2 of the case record.

The third and final interview was with Teacher 3 (Lorna). Though not a classroom teacher, Lorna was included as it was felt that in her specialist teacher role, she had contact with a broad range of both teacher and parent views in the school. This teacher, though, was well aware of what was occurring with the project through the school newsletters and informal discussion. As a neighbour of the researcher, where the relationship was less formal with this staff member that with other teachers on staff, this was also seen as an advantage in eliciting frank and unreserved comment.

This interview was held in the teacher's home, one weekend afternoon and lasted about 30 minutes. The same set of questions were asked of this teacher as had been asked in all previous individual interviews. Unfortunately, a tape recording malfunction occurred which meant that the interview was not recorded. However, as a summary of the interview was made immediately after the interview, general comments and themes were recorded, though verbatim comments cannot be given. This summary was returned to the teacher for validation and has also been entered into Section 2 of the case record.

As mentioned earlier, data gathered from this series of interviews have been triangulated with public documents, diary reflections and notes (Sections 3 and 4 of the case record). All of these have been used to illustrate points made in interviews or to highlight aspects where the interview comments reflect a dissonance between public actions and private thoughts. They also highlight aspects of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment

Project that have been the basis of ongoing evaluations and reflections by the co-facilitators throughout the life of the project. Collectively, they provide a measure of the trustworthiness of the data as a basis for sound evaluation.

3.44 Phase 4: Analysis of the Collected Data

Once summarised and/or transcribed, the data from the discussions and interviews were searched for patterns. At this broad level of analysis, the patterns that emerged related to the identification of motivations and barriers to participation, perceptions of the Healthy Schools process and the opportunities for developing this process further. It became apparent, in fact, that organising the material as answers to the research questions offered an effective way of providing structure to the data analysis. Hence, data was coded and sorted around the key concepts contained in these research questions. This helped to further clarify the objectives of the research and the research questions overall.

A number of documents were reviewed and provided additional information and perspectives about the school. These, and the personal reflective diary entries, notes and records of the researcher, helped to illustrate relevant issues and themes that were drawn from the focus group discussions and interviews, and that related to the eight research questions.

3.45 Phase 5: Discussion and Evaluation Related to Participation

The final phase of this study into participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project involved the discussion of the findings that emerged from the analyses of the data. This involved the synthesis of ideas and perspectives gained from the literature review, the perceptions of the researcher as an 'insider' into the workings of the Healthy Schools project and the school generally, and the findings from the analyses of the various data sources. From these discussions has emerged an evaluation of participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. This evaluation concludes with a number of implications about participation and participatory practices, including participatory action research. These relate to the project itself, to this and other schools and to the wider community.

3.5 CONCLUSION

The research design of this evaluation has been described in this chapter. It has provided the rationale for the selection of the open inquiry approach to evaluation within the context of the participatory action research project at the school. It has demonstrated the appropriateness of the choice of techniques used for data-gathering. It has also outlined the phases in the research process which illustrate the conduct of this study. These phases include 'taking stock' of the participatory action research project itself, negotiating access to and ensuring confidentiality of the participants, collecting, analysing and discussing this data and finally evaluating the participatory processes as a result of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure - Rudolf Bahro.

(in Greig,S.,Pike,G. and Selby,D.,1989, *Greenprints for changing Schools* London: WWF and Kogan Page)

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of this evaluation into aspects of participation within the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project and discusses these results in the light of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The research findings are presented and discussed as answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the motivations for participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project?

2. What mitigates against initial participation in decision making?

3. What perceptions of the participatory processes are held by participants in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project?

4. What are the perceived barriers to the process?

5. What have been identified as important factors for maintaining and building momentum for participation in the project?

6. What evidence is there of a shift of balance in decision making within the school community?

7. What are the opportunities for expanding participatory processes within the school context?

In Chapter 1, this set of research questions also included the following:

8. What can be learned about participatory action research that assists the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project and may inform other schools and the community about the process?

This last question will be answered in the final chapter. This answer represents the general implications of this evaluation both within the school and in the wider context of other school and community projects. This answer, then, both completes this discussion and serves to synthesise this report.

4.1 MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

The purpose of this section is to investigate the reasons why people in the school community initially became participants in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. It addresses six categories of responses, reflecting both personal concerns and process opportunities. The first set of responses clustered around the following concerns:

(a) the impact of the physical and social environment of the school;

(b) the conjunction between adults' current experiences in this environment and their experiences when they were school children;

(c) the disjunction between before-school and school experiences of the social and physical environment, for children and adults; and

(d) an awareness of and concern for the effects of environment in shaping attitudes and values;

There were two other reasons for initial participation which reflected the availability of opportunities for change through participatory processes. These were:

(e) the devolutionary processes of the Department of Education; and

(f) the Healthy Schools process itself.

The first of these related to organisational change within schools initiated by the Department of Education. The second related to having a process that could address the personal concerns of individuals regarding the existing environmental conditions in the school and that could also guide the devolutionary process. Findings about each of the six categories identified as influencing participation are outlined below.

(a) The Impact of the Physical and Social Environment

It was apparent that people with whom discussions were held had similar responses to the school environment. These centred around the impressions of the outdoor physical environment - it was perceived as sterile and degraded. In the social environment of the playground, too, parents perceived that their children were unsupported in some of their social interactions and/or were bored.

The responses to the physical environment, particularly on the issue of lack of shade, indicated the shock that parents felt about the exposure of their children, unprotected, to the sun. Their comments were typified by the following from Veronica, a parent:

> The reason I got involved was because I thought the playgrounds were very boring, the forts and things. I mean, it was hard to have interesting play. The Grade 1 playground was obviously completely inadequate... One day I walked up (to the school) at lunch and (my child) and a couple of her friends were sitting in the full sun on this tiny seat and I was just horrified. They had no hats on or anything. There's just got to be somewhere nicer, better, shady and a much better environment....

Sue, a parent, in commenting about the environment said:

> ... something wasn't right about school - the social environment and sun safety. I didn't expect that the children would be wantonly exposed to the sun without protection. This was a shock!

The following comments, recorded in the researcher's journal, illustrate some children's perspectives on the school environment (see Section 4 of the case record). These reflected issues concerned with the lack of interesting things to do during breaks from class, the rationing of play items, the number of rules, the comfort and appearance of the place and some safety issues.

Daniel: We don't have any equipment except a couple of balls and slabs and slabs and slabs and slabs and slabs and slabs of concrete.

Simon: Turn the bitumen into grass. When you fall over it hurts your knees too much.

Daniel: All we've got are rules for where we can't go and what's left hasn't got any shade.

Simon: It's too boring at school. There's too many rules. You can't climb the trees or poles.

Simon: It's too boring at school. The worst is playtime. There's nothing to do.

Daniel: (The school) is too ugly - only brown, maroon, white, black and clear (the glass in the windows). It needs to be more colourful... The gardens need watering a bit more often. They look ugly, only brown.

There was a recognition that the grounds, especially the Year 1 playground needed attention. Many of the comments about the state of the grounds had been confirmed earlier through the surveying and 'visioning' activities of the Grounds Committee. As was mentioned in the project summary in Chapter 1, concerns with sun safety, greening, comfort and the deteriorated state of the playgrounds were common concerns for many parents and teachers in the school (see also selected entries from reflective journal in Section 4 of the case record).

While teachers acknowledged the need for change in the physical environment, the responses from parents (who mainly had children in the lower grades) focused on the *social* as well as the physical environment. In terms of this aspect of the environment, parents commented that they felt that their children were unsupported in the playground, especially when they started school. Comments from Julie, a parent, reflected this:

> I wanted to see how (my child), who wasn't gregarious, operated in the playground. He was sitting by himself - not exactly excluded - but not able to enter the group. I have always known that he needs social support to enter a group but no teacher has ever asked me about what I know about my child.

Sue, a parent, supported this:

> ... mainly, though, (my child) was miserable in the playground. She started getting sick and having headaches and didn't want to go to school, and even though she loved her teacher, I couldn't understand why she was so unhappy and people wouldn't play with her...

However, Cassie, a teacher, did acknowledge the relationship between the physical and social aspects of the environment when she commented:

> I think the kids are getting a bit to the stage where they need something down there because they are getting over-familiar with what's there. I think that's causing a lot of bored behaviour in the playground that we've been experiencing this year...

(b) The conjunction between current and past school experiences

For parents, their responses to the physical and social environment of the school were coloured by their memories of what school had been like for them as children. They were dismayed that in the passage of thirty years or so, there appeared to be a number of aspects of the social and physical environment of the school that had changed little. Peter, a parent, expressed these feelings in the following:

> I remember school when I was a kid and it was such a formal and spartan place to be in and I walked around the school here... and basically the school was the same. It was still just as bad. It brought back a lot of feelings that I had when I was a kid...

Leona, also a parent, remarked on the memories that had been engendered by the questionnaire in the school survey. Her comments were:

> That question in the questionnaire just sort of rang bells for a lot of people and I had the same sort of memories as Peter in my school... just watching the ants and isolation in the playground and I think the fact that the playgrounds haven't really been looked at as being a central part of the school (experience). Things seem to be very geared to inside buildings... whereas in the playground, often that is where a lot of skills to relate to people are learnt, or not learnt.

Another parent, Anita, reflected on similar impressions connected with her past:

> When we got the initial questionnaire about what do you remember from your school days, immediately it came back to me, that harsh asphalt and the isolation and so on in the playground.

Yet another parent, Joe, summed up his response to the social environment of the school with a general comment. He said that there was a need:

> ... to get away from the structured discipline of the 50s and 60s when you sat in a classroom and you were just talked to.

(c) Disjunction with before-school experiences

The school experiences of their children were seen to be in a major disjunction with the experiences of both parents and children in their pre-school settings. Sue elaborated on this when she commented:

> (My child) had had a wonderful life at pre-school. She was never excluded, never miserable, creatively indulged and expanded. (Yet at school) at parent interviews and informal talk I only got negative things "Why do you think she won't have a go? (Your child) is most unwilling to try things!" I was shocked by that!

Another parent, Anita, commented:

> It struck me when (my child) first started going to school. (My child) had really caring-type teachers in kindy and pre-school and then you get to primary school and suddenly the teachers' attitudes are so much different... and their approach is so different.

This was exemplified by comments written in an earlier journal (see extract in Section 4 of the case record) where Julie had said:

> Overnight virtually, these young children, just five years old, were thrust into an autocratic system where they had to line up on dots on a hot parade ground, girls and boys in separate lines, regimented into classrooms that were ugly and uninviting... where the playground was virtually unsupervised and uninspiring, where lunch was eaten on the concrete, permission was needed to have a pee.

Children also recognised that things were different at school compared to pre-school and that there was differential treatment between themselves and teachers. From informal verbatim recordings in the researcher's journal (see Section 4 of the case record), come the following comments:

> Simon: You can only talk to your friends if you do it sneakily, but the teachers can have a chat anytime they want to.
>
> Simon: Well, it's swimming day, (and I don't want to go), and it's too cold and anyway the teachers don't go in.
>
> Simon: At school there are five rules for every one thing!

Some parents' comments also reflected the lack of meaningful communication between the school setting and home, compared with the pre-school experience. These remarks indicated both a lack of communication per se, or the fact that communication tended to be mainly a one-way process, from teacher to parent. Leona's comment indicates the first category:

> ... There appears to be no interest in sharing what's happening on a day to day basis in the classrooms, whereas when the kids are in kindy there was always at least a newsletter-type sheet on the sign-on desk, telling you some of the things they have done.

Julie's concerns focused on the second, the lack of two-way communication processes at school:

> There is the problem of teachers not wanting to know anything about the children or the children's interests. At kindy and pre-school you had entry interviews for instance, plus plenty of other opportunities to say, look, this is what happened on the weekend and the kids loved it... or I am a bit concerned about such and such. But there is no opportunity, no one wants to know that your kid is enjoying science or hating social studies or feeling unhappy in the playground.

Reinforcement of these one-way processes for communication with the school have been clearly spelled out recently in a newsletter item from the principal (see Section 3 in the case record). The requirement for parents to make an appointment to see a teacher if they have matters of concern, or to write a note if the issue is not of a worrying nature,

has been explicitly stated. While it is recognised that teachers have limited time for discussion, the message is clear that planning and preparation are more important than informal interactions and exchanges with parents. Freeing teachers from speaking to parents so they can prepare for the day is understandable, but the hidden message is that personal communication with parents is an unwanted intrusion.

(d) The effects of environment in shaping attitudes, values and futures

As well as responding personally to the physical and social environment of the school, parent respondents also articulated knowledge of and concern for the broader effects of 'environment' in shaping children's attitudes and values. Environmental quality was acknowledged as an important current issue for parents. There was recognition that the school environment, both the social and physical aspects, impacted upon children's learning, both academically and socially and that these were legitimate environmental concerns as well as educational ones. As Veronica, a parent, said:

> If they are coping a lot better with playing and learning in the playground, what happens in the classroom will be affected too.

and Leona stated:

> ... the playground, that is where a lot of skills to relate to people are learnt or not learnt.

The concerns of parents reached beyond their apprehension about the quality of the school experience for their own particular children. Julie noted that she perceived, in each group of parents with young children who entered the school at the beginning of a year, that there were feelings of shock and concern with aspects of the school environment. These feelings eventually diminished as both parents and children made adjustments to the setting. However, as these adjustments occurred at the personal, not at the institutional level, the next group of parents and children also went through the same processes of shock followed by adaptation. As Julie stated:

> I just don't think it's right that you have to go through that trauma and that each group (of new parents and children) has to keep going through it

However, environmental concerns were not confined to the immediate school environment. There were also concerns for the future for children and the influences that were shaping and limiting future options. Both Sue and Julie stated that their reasons for initiating the project related to these feelings of general concern about diminishing future options, but also to a recognition by them that there were solutions. Sue stated that she was aware that:

> ... no bandaids can be applied and that you have to start locally and take some responsibility. I felt unempowered but it became clear that no one else could be much more able to solve (the) problems that worried me...

It became apparent that both facilitators shared a common view that solutions to 'the environmental crisis' related to active engagement, for themselves and others, in challenging the status quo and creating positive changes in democratic ways *at the local level.*

(e) Devolution in the School System

As a factor in motivating people to become involved in creating change within the school environment, the devolutionary processes of the Education Department were recognised as a contributor. This was noted especially by members of the school staff. The principal commented that:

> We are moving to the stage where parents are becoming a lot more involved in our schools and the education of their children. It's their children that are coming here five days a week, so they should have the opportunity to get involved where they wish to...

Katrina, a teacher, confirmed this in her comments when she noted that, in terms of devolution and parent/teacher decision making, teachers and schools had been focussing more of their attention on these processes in recent times. She continued:

> I've got a positive attitude towards (parent involvement) because I think that's the way schools are going and I think that everyone has to try and change their attitude....That's the way we are being channelled and that's the way schools are focussing.

(e) Finding a Suitable Process to Guide Change

Apart from the personal and institutional motivations for people wanting to see changes to the school environment, a key factor in determining participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project was having a mechanism that could guide the changes. Particularly for the facilitators of the project, the Healthy Schools approach met with their separately developed, but jointly held views, about appropriate strategies for creating change democratically.

Not only did the Healthy Schools approach provide a way of addressing the different concerns of individuals but it provided a step-by-step guide for the change processes themselves. The positiveness of the approach, especially with its focus on the development of a 'shared vision' for all members of the school community, enabled people to turn their individual concerns into collective actions. This was expressed in the following statement from Anita (who has since established the Supportive Environment Committee, another sub-group of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project):

> The project is showing me that all sorts of things can be done, once you start talking to other people. I would never have thought that the changes could have been made which I have seen... The playground was just the start of a wholly different approach to doing so many things at the school... Once upon a time I would have said nothing could ever change (but) working with the committee... has shown me that all sorts of things can really happen.

4.11 Discussion

These findings about the motivations for peoples' participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project can be discussed in terms of individual, collective and institutional motivations. At the individual level, parents and children in particular, responded to the structures and organisation of life in schools and did not really like what they experienced. The reproduction of hierarchical structures in which parents feel marginalised and children (even as young as five) know where the authority and power rests is clear throughout the data. The references to the 'slabs and slabs and slabs of concrete' where children have parades and are 'lined up on dots in the hot sun' reflects a military or prison-like past of educational institutions. It is apparent that the physical design of the grounds and buildings dictates and perpetuates, to some degree, these

hierarchical procedures and patterns of behavior that are vestiges of schooling in earlier periods.

The alienation of parents from the school lives of their children, through the continuation of practices that keep parents and teachers 'at arm's length', is another indication of the marginalised experience of life in schools for some parents. This marginalisation is experienced as feelings of impotence to create change and the perception that parental concerns are not being seriously addressed. This clearly demonstrates the control that teachers have over the school lives of both parents and children. The sense of partnership that parents and children felt with their teachers during the preschool years is not evident in the school setting. In fact, for many parents, the experience of school in the 1990s is reminiscent of their own years at school in the 1950s and 1960s. This may be of comfort for some members of the school community. However, for those involved in this study, it was felt that some of these practices and procedures are inappropriate for dealing with the new and changing demands of individual, community and societal life that children are experiencing now and which will continue to change in the future. The feelings of impotence by parents to create change concurs with Stevenson's (1987) comments that historically the school's intended function has been to *not* promote change or reconstruction. As Popkewitz (1983:10) argues "schools resist change through active perpetuation of stability". This appears to still be the case.

Schools may be daunting places for some children and parents that reinforce their sense of powerlessness in a school. However, teachers and administrators are seeking ways to redress these power imbalances as comments of the teachers and principal show. The current wave of reform in schools relating to devolution, power sharing with parents and the wider community, provides an opportunity for meaningful change that is beyond the desires or resistances of individual teachers and administrators. Devolution puts the processes of democratic decision making and the realignment of relationships within the school setting firmly on the agenda of *all* teachers and *all* schools. It also provides for parents the opportunities, that may have been lacking previously, to challenge their allotted and historical role at the margins of life in schools.

In terms of critical theory, these demonstrations of shared decision making indicate the *productive* role of schools in *resisting* reproductive patterns of authority and control. There are being demonstrated, through the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, those more *emancipatory* practices, social relations and values that represent an action-oriented democratisation of decision making and social practices within this school community.

The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project has provided a process that enables individuals' concerns with the environment and institutional concerns with devolution to be addressed through a community approach to problem-solving. The project has created an opportunity for parents, and to a limited extent, for children, to change the social and physical environment of the school while providing the teachers and administration with a process that demonstrates devolution.

4.2 FACTORS MITIGATING AGAINST GREATER INVOLVEMENT

The section above has identified a number of factors that have generated participation in the school project. This section identifies those elements that have acted to limit participation. There are many immediate personal components, such as work and family commitments. However, it has become apparent that there are also *structural* dimensions that impact upon personal decisions and which inhibit participation. These have been categorised as factors which reinforce parents' 'sense of place' at the margins of the lives of their children in schools and have been categorised into three groups:

(a) Experience of school as a child

(b) Lack of role models

(c) Tacit approval by both parents and teachers for a marginal role

(a) Experience of School as a Child

This section discusses the relationship between the school experiences of parents when they were children and their feelings when they return to school as parents. The following comments exemplify this:

> ... the first time I walked into (the principal's) office when my son started going to school, I almost felt like saying "Please, sir!". I found it quite uncomfortable the first time I went to see him. And calling him Chas.

Another parent reinforced these feelings of discomfort by saying:

> I don't think I called him anything!

The principal, too, expressed similar feelings about the discomfort of many parents upon arrival in the school, many for the first time since leaving primary school themselves. He commented:

> ... even if they are adults, (some parents) still fear school for whatever reason... When I am interviewing some of the Grade One mums with their first child they are terrified. Being in the principal's office, the child is quite happy. It is the mum, sometimes the dad, but more so the mum. They have this fear of schools.

(b) Lack of Role Models in Own Parents

Parent respondents noted that their own parents' role in decision making in schools had been very superficial and that the authoritarianism of the period encouraged this. Consequently, this current generation of parents has not had adequate role models for wider or more participatory involvement. Comment from Peter and Anita, both parents, reflected this:

> ... (When I went to school) parents weren't involved at all other than in a superficial way. I think they had a P&C. I can remember that, but most of what they used to do was put stalls up on sports day and put out red cordial and those sorts of things. And that was about the extent. Of course parents weren't concerned about the playground... Our parents didn't see it as a problem.
>
> But everyone conformed more in those days. It was a very authoritarian society.

(c) Tacit Acceptance by Parents and Teachers of Limited Parental Involvement

It was discussed that the current kinds and levels of parental participation had altered little from the days when these parents were school children. It was generally considered that these marginal levels and types of involvement were being perpetuated

year after year as each new group of parents followed the models set by previous groups of parents. Katrina, both a parent and a teacher in the school commented:

> The only kind of thing that I have known in the past has always been things involving the P&C, where the P&C took on a project and then they enlisted the help of other people, but this is the only time I have ever known the school to be opened, or a project to be opened, to the whole school community....

Parent involvement tends to be in two major areas - individual classroom help and fund-raising activities of the Parents' and Citizens' Association. In relation to the first, individual teachers may make a request for parental assistance within their own classroom. This individualised approach is reinforced in the School Prospectuses 1991-1994 (see Section 3 in the case record) where the following information is written:

> At times teachers will request parents to assist in the classroom activities and with outside activities.

Experience has shown that these requests for assistance are personal, at the behest of individual teachers, rather than being an open policy of the school. Where teachers choose not to work with parents, parents are denied the opportunity to really know what is occurring in the classroom with their children. Obviously, this ad hoc approach acts to reduce parental involvement overall as parents do not know expectations about the value of their participation from one year to the next. One year they may be greatly involved in their children's classroom activities, the next there may be little encouragement for participation.

The second major area of parental involvement is through the fund-raising and administrative activities of the Parents' and Citizens' Association. This includes activities such as the tuck-shop, annual fete, cake and plant sales as well as administering funds. The 1993 Prospectus document (see Section 3 in the case record) indicates that these fundraising activities are the prime concern of the Parents' and Citizens' Association, giving this most attention in the one-page write-up. Secondary attention is given to the monitoring of policy decisions of the Education Department. Nothing is said about the interface of parents with the decision making processes at the school level itself.

4.21 Discussion

The barriers that parents feel that limit parental participation in decision making can be collectively examined as factors that reinforce a 'sense of place' at the margins of the school experience. The first of these is in relation to a sense of place that parents bring with them cognitively when they enter the school as parents. The memories of the authority figure of 'the principal' influence the interactions of parents even when they are adults. At school, this is where many parents first *learnt* to be marginal. The physical structures and appearance of the school, its waiting and office areas may have changed little in the passage of thirty years or so, acting to reinforce hierarchical relations when adults remake contact with schools as parents. As Preston and Symes (1992:187) state "the school's topography, which is saturated with power dimensions... becomes another dimension of the school's structured imposition..." . This appears to be just as relevant for parents as it is for current students. The foyer, with cabinets of sporting trophies and pennants adorning the walls, along with honour boards and lists of school duxes, represent the *iconography* of the school. These physical dimensions, which parents remember, help to reintroduce the feelings of tentativeness, indeed of marginalisation, that parents experienced as school children.

Another aspect of parental contact with schools that helps to define a 'sense of place' at the margins concerns the lack of role models for parents. Both their own parents and the 'generations' of parents already in the school provide socially approved guidelines for parents and their involvement in school activities. These models include the levels and types of involvement that are customary in schools, ranging from passive to active, but always in the sense that parents act as *assistants* to teachers and administration. However, in terms of parents as decision makers, ground rules have not yet been established. Parents (and teachers) are uncertain where the boundaries for this kind of participation lie. This lack of appropriate modelling, and the uncertainty that it engenders, may inhibit parents from taking steps towards greater participation.

Not only is there a lack of appropriate role models for parents in terms of participatory decision making, but there appears to have been tacit approval by both the parent body (especially through the Parents' and Citizens' Association) and by the teachers and administrators, for these limited roles for parents. The Parents' and Citizens' Association

as the official voice of the parent body in the school acts to legitimate the authority of the principal and the teachers, rather than being a true voice for parental interests and concerns in the school. Parents' and Citizens' Associations have traditionally been concerned with major fund raising in schools and the Ashgrove association is no exception. It responds to the curriculum and management needs of the school by providing short-term services, such as maintenance, but mostly through the provision of funding. It has not been involved in providing, as the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project has, a strategic planning service, nor has it been the originator of innovation.

However, there is evidence that the Parents' and Citizens' Association does endorse greater involvement with school-based decision making regarding curriculum - as its approval of the recent development of the Human Relations Education curriculum shows. Further, it has endorsed both the Healthy Schools project and the Grounds Committee activities. However, school documentation does not mention these participatory roles for parents. This indicates the traditional base from which the Parents' and Citizens' Association at Ashgrove is currently working. For parents, both new to the school or with children already in attendance, there are no clear statements that indicate that the role of the Parents' and Citizens' Association is actively changing its focus to include greater engagement in school decision making processes.

This section has highligbted some of the structural factors that serve to limit substantive parental participation in decision making. Parents' own experiences as school children, reinforced by a relatively unchanged physical and social environment and by the 'usual' business of school operations has limited parental roles and levels of participation. Parents' perceptions of the possibilities for participation are well and truly delimited, and the parameters are set, by the perceptions of a 'sense of place', at the margins of life in schools.

4.3 PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

Perceptions of the participatory process within the school community range across a broad spectrum, from some parents and teachers holding negative feelings about parent-

teacher collaboration to those with enthusiastic commitment. The comments from the school principal reflected this range, in reference to the teachers, when he noted:

> ... if you looked at a continuum, you've got those who are totally committed, those that go along but could be swayed and then those who are totally opposed to it.

However, in general the comments of the active participants in the project indicated enthusiasm for the process. The principal stated:

> ... this particular process with the Healthy Schools has been the best I have been involved with in nearly thirty years of teaching.

Another teacher, Cassie, said:

> It's made it easier on us, like it has taken a big burden off us redoing the playground, because it needed to be done. If it hadn't been taken up by a parent group with teachers involved, it would have been all on our shoulders... and there's no way we could have come up with the things that have happened or done all that.

Katrina, who is both a teacher and a parent at the school, linked the project directly to the processes of devolution that are occurring in the school and saw the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project as an example of devolution in practice. She commented:

> We've been getting the message for a couple of years but probably this is one of the first times we (the teachers) have been asked to interact with parents... and I think teachers appreciate being asked to be involved, to have their input.

Katrina continued:

> ... this is the only time I have ever known the school to be opened... to the whole school community, where teachers, parents, outside the school even, could be involved if they wanted to and I think that's what has been good about it. It's been a complete change from what the school's been used to and I think that's what has taken some time for some people to come to terms with. It's been such a radical change to what they have been used to.

Another of the actively involved teachers, Gordon, also stated that in terms of parent involvement:

> For a teacher it's interesting to see the community get involved in something and just see how it operates. Although it's outside the classroom, it's still getting the community involved in the school in the decision making, running the project. Everybody's put their little piece in and that's interesting to watch, because I think there's lessons to be learned from that (for) when it starts to be applied within the classroom or in other things that happen in the school.

It was most apparent, both from the focus group discussions and anecdotally, that parents who thought they had little opportunity to influence decisions in the school and then found that there were opportunities for participation, were very enthusiastic about the project. Anita, one of these parents, remarked:

> ... whereas once upon a time I would have said nothing could ever change... it (the Healthy Schools process) has shown me that all sorts of things can really happen.

Peter revealed his enthusiasm for the opportunities with the following statement:

> Dare I say it is the dawning of a new era in the school?

4.31 Discussion

This discussion centres around the findings of this evaluation regarding the general perceptions of participants about the processes for collaborative decision making employed in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. The staff and administration of the school represent those with real authority in the setting. This group, it could be assumed, has the most to lose from power sharing processes. It could be expected that, as a block, there would be resistance to the idea of democratic decision making. In fact, as the findings reveal, there is a diversity of view.

The principal was enthusiastic for the project and the processes employed and recognised these as being excellent. Of the teachers interviewed, all expressed support and enthusiasm for the process. These teachers and the principal also indicated in their interviews that there was more support from the teaching staff than parents were aware

of, even though this support was not necessarily represented as active participation in the project. Limits on active engagement occurred for a number of reasons. Teachers are involved in a wide and ever increasing range of administrative tasks in addition to their classroom teaching. They have preferred areas of curriculum interest in the school on which they focus. Like many parents, they also have the demands of busy family, study and work lives which limit their participation.

However, it was recognised that some teachers were negative about the process. It was indicated that this related to opposition to the involvement of parents in decision making per se, rather than the Healthy Schools project in particular. Obviously, where members of either the parent or teacher group feel that school decision making should be essentially the province of teachers, then their perceptions of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project will be influenced by this underlying belief. Where parents and teachers believe that there is a collaborative role for both then this is more likely (though not necessarily) to lead to more positive reactions.

It was concluded by the teachers interviewed that negativism was more to do with some teachers' individual personality characteristics and also their view of themselves as 'experts' (to be discussed in a later section). A narrow definition of curriculum, held by some teachers, is perhaps a component in these resistant, 'expert' attitudes to parental involvement and to a project that defines curriculum in broader terms.

Comments, however, generally reflect the positiveness that teachers and administration have towards the decision making processes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. That *both* parents and teachers can and are contributing to the decision making is recognised. This is an example of devolution which acknowledges the valuable contributions of both groups. Teachers have not been disempowered by the process of collaborative decision making. Parents have not become all-powerful. There is the recognition that the process has achieved more than what could have been achieved if the playground development had remained a curriculum decision to have been made by teachers alone. The possibility for collaboration in other curriculum areas, especially in the teacher province 'inside the classroom' is positively, if tentatively, recognised.

4.4 PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITY

This section identifies a number of perceived barriers or hurdles to participation that became apparent once the project was underway. These impacted upon the capacity of participants to maintain momentum for the change processes that the Healthy Schools project was engendering. In essence, these barriers relate to confronting 'the usual way of doing things' and denote the uncertainty and resistance that is generated in a 'paradigm shift' from a hierarchically organised institution to some degree of power sharing. These barriers appeared in relation both to the perceptions of appropriate outcomes for the project and to its process planning. They reflect the dynamic tensions that exist between 'doing something visible quickly' and engaging in long-term processes of change.

4.41 Barriers Related to Appropriate Outcomes

Barriers arose as a result of differences in perceptions of appropriate outcomes for the project. The Grounds Committee was intent on changing from the previous approach to school ground decision making. This meant reorienting from ad hoc, short-term, visible-ends actions to integrative, long-term, process planning before actions. The following comments from parent participants, Anita and Leona, reflect on this difference:

> This is not about putting in an extra fort down in the playground but this is a plan for the next twenty years... which doesn't have to fit the old style of the way they built the playground. It is a complete revision of the way in which we have looked at everything to do with playgrounds.
>
> Even now, the fact that we haven't got a structure up in the playground is really upsetting a lot of people. You know, they can't sort of see the rest of the things that are there...

There was a considerable amount of criticism from the school community, parents and teachers alike, related to the length of time for completion of the Junior Playground, as indicated in the following set of comments from parents, Veronica and Joe, respectively:

> That was another criticism around the school, that everything was taking so long but I think if you're going to do it properly you've got to put that time and effort into the thing.
>
> I think there's this perception of people to want to see things happen instantly.

Cassie, a teacher, also summed up this same perception when she commented:

> I think the main barrier is the amount of time that it takes, because a lot of people got frustrated and (thought) that nothing was happening - which wasn't the case...

It was felt by participants that because some physical structure like play equipment, was not erected quickly, that the Grounds Committee was not 'getting on with the job'. This was reflected in the following comments made by Joe:

> All they focus on is the finished playground structure and that's why it's so important that we actually get that playground bit of equipment in there just to complete that loop. It's a psychological thing.

Gordon, a teacher, also commented:

> You can forget that the talk may have been six months, but I think there would have been maybe four meetings of three hours each, which is twelve hours of talk-time. This isn't a great deal of time when you're talking about a school community and a project with quite large dollar terms on it.

The fact that the project was concerned with whole grounds planning, rather than ad hoc solutions which offered quick and visible results, was a major factor in the perceived slowness of the project. Katrina, teacher and parent, made the following point about planning:

> What I thought we desperately needed as a school was a better playground - better grounds all over - the whole picture rather than just working on isolated little projects that someone thinks is great and then in 10 years time you see that this doesn't fit the big picture. Then you say, let's get rid of that and start over. What wasted effort!

This was exemplified in the remarks from Julie regarding the relatively recent siting of the groundsman's shed. She said:

> Someone decided that the groundsman needed a shed and so this was just plonked down in the only available running space for the Year Two's, with little apparent concern for the needs of the children. This is ad hoc!

4.42 Barriers Related to Planning Processes

The processes of decision making in the Healthy Schools project also challenged 'the usual way of doing things'. Uncertainty in working with new processes and ideas, perceived parent and teacher resistance, the impact of negative feedback and the time commitments for planning were all aspects of the decision making processes that affected motivation and momentum.

A. Uncertainty

Even though enthusiasm for the processes was high amongst those who were participating in the project, there was still some uncertainty as to the real level of shared decision making within the school. Peter expressed this when he said:

> We can sort of recommend. We are not decision-makers per se. We don't have the power to make decisions, do we?

Peter was expressing the tentativeness that everyone felt regarding the processes they were involved in. Lack of confidence that the decisions that were made at the Grounds Committee level would remain secure in the face of resistance from those who traditionally held power lay at the heart of this tentativeness.

Uncertainty with the new collaborative processes was also manifested within the internal workings of the Grounds Committee itself. However, it was recognised that these were difficulties common to most groups in their early formation and especially if the group was attempting to operate in non-hierarchical ways, challenging the 'expert' leadership mode. Gordon summed up the feelings for group members when he commented:

> I think one of the difficulties for me is to get the overall picture. Even while the work was being done, and I'd been to most of the meetings, I still couldn't get the picture in my head of what it was going to be.

> People would ask me questions at school and I'd think to myself, 'Well, I've got more information than most people and yet I still couldn't keep the whole'. I think that's a real difficulty because it's such a big program involving so many facets and when you broke into little teams and that little team goes off and then you get working bees... . That's a difficulty - to keep the overall picture, to keep everyone informed of the overall picture...

However, the processes did enable people to 'see things differently', in positive ways, especially about the strengths of others in the group. Anita commented that:

> I feel quite awestruck at times. The depth of ability and creativity and imagination encompassed at some of the meetings... and the talk about things... It really amazed me - the depth and talent and ability... .

B. Challenging Parent Decision Making Processes

The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project was a challenge to decision making within the parent body itself. In terms of the usual way of decision making within this group, it was commented that the project was 'doing things differently' in that it was adopting cooperative and participative approaches as opposed to the more usual 'vocal minority' approach to decision making. This was exemplified in the comments from Julie who said:

> (The usual approaches) seem to be confronting and critical, but Healthy School is less direct, trying to get people to see there is a problem without having to be told... It's a process, not one-offs. It is non-combative and non-confrontational...

Veronica, Peter and Leona stated, respectively:

> (The school) got competitive sports reintroduced because a number of outspoken parents spoke passionately enough for it.

> .. it comes back to vocal minorities. You come to the motivated minorities who control what goes on. So we are not vocal and we are not yackity.

> That's right. That goes against our way of doing things which is cooperation and participation.

Katrina, a parent and teacher, also described this narrow approach to decision making within the parent body when she said:

> ... in those days it was ever only a few people (parents) who were consulted about anything... and they more less made the decisions for everyone... a small group of the P&C and a few others... So I think this is a wonderful change.

C. Perceived Teacher Barriers

A number of comments were made about perceived teacher barriers to the project and about their adverse impact on the momentum of the project. Some teachers were enthusiastic supporters of the project. Some were disinterested observers. Others were seen as demonstrating outright opposition to the project and parental decision making per se. These perceived teacher barriers have been categorised as follows:

a) Teacher Opposition - Teachers as experts

b) Teacher Lack of Interest - Teachers as fencesitters

Teachers as gatekeepers

a) Opposition - Teachers as Experts

A strong perception of parents, when identifying teacher barriers to the project, was that teachers saw themselves as 'experts', being confronted by parent non-experts. Parents interpreted this as a significant barrier. It is exemplified by the following comments. Anita said:

> Maybe I am being too harsh, but I felt as if there were some teachers who were very resistant to parents coming in because I felt as if maybe they were saying 'This is our sphere of expertise and not yours'.

Peter added:

> You are a bunch of amateurs!

The teachers involved in the project and the principal commented that these were valid perceptions. The principal identified a gradation of views in relation to the project, that ranged from those held by teachers who were enthusiastic to those held by teachers who were prepared to be swayed and that:

> ... there is a gradation from that group down to the ones who are negative. They don't detract totally, they are just negative about what is happening... There are a number of teachers who can see in the long term the effect is going to be good, but don't necessarily agree with the process because of their own prejudice that is steeped in their traditional feeling of what should happen in a school.

The principal commented further:

> (The process) is not going to happen quickly because there is that negativity out there. Some people feel that this is their province and they should not be encroached upon...

Cassie, a teacher, also noted that some teachers would have seen the process as a threat to their authority or autonomy and remarked:

> I think it just depends on you as an individual and the way you teach and your ideas and philosophies.

b) Lack of Interest - Teachers as Fencesitters

There were a set of parental perceptions of teachers as 'fencesitters' to the project. These teachers were perceived as being neither for nor against the project but their silence was interpreted as a lack of interest. An absence of comment, non-participation in the project activities and not making the most of opportunities for using the project as a teaching resource formed the basis for these perceptions. Peter summed up:

> Well, they may be just sitting and watching to see what happens to it... They are actually standing back and watching rather than participating...

It was further commented upon by Leona that:

> I don't think they are really anti. I think maybe on the fence. But I don't think they are using their imagination, either, in exploring how the kids can use what is going on in the playground at the moment, in the lessons they are doing in the classroom...

The principal affirmed that there was a group of teachers who were neutral about the project but that, to him at least, they did make positive comments. He stated:

> There are the ones in the middle of the continuum... prepared to be swayed and might pass comments on the actual physical happenings and say 'Oh, this is looking good!'

However, these comments were never said directly to the parents involved in the project who consequently built up a picture of teacher disinterest.

Some parents interpreted teacher silence about the project and a lack of use of the potential of the project in their teaching as a lack of interest in the playgrounds of the school and the outdoor environment generally. Peter summed up these feelings when he said:

> The teachers see their responsibility primarily in the classroom to impart knowledge or whatever they do in the classroom... but where does their responsibility start or stop outside the classroom? They basically supervise the kids in the playground but that's really all they do... . They do sport as part of the curriculum... but the children's leisure time and the time they spend outside class hours in the playground, they just seem to fall outside the teachers' interests.

This was alluded to in comments from Lorna, the specialist teacher, when she remarked that teachers did not really see their job as involving the planning and construction of playgrounds.

However, it was seen that this perceived lack of interest by teachers in the outside classroom environment, in fact created a 'window of opportunity' for parents to become involved in decision making in this facet of school life. Parents felt that perhaps teachers did not really have much experience with designing playgrounds, that in fact they were not 'experts' in this area, at all. It was commented upon by Julie:

> I think they haven't been offered a chance to participate with a playground much before... . The Department just sort of plonks them in the grounds.

Some parents in fact saw themselves as filling a void. Peter, again, noted:

> I don't see a conflict between what the teachers' responsibility and the parents' responsibilities are because the teachers don't see their responsibility as looking after the playground and designing the playground, even looking after the kids in the playground... What we are saying is that parents can have an input outside of their so-called official time... . I am sure it is a very important part that the parents can influence.

b) Lack of Interest - Teachers as Gatekeepers

There were a number of comments from parents about teachers not making the most of opportunities offered by the Healthy School project to incorporate it into their curriculum, thus enabling the children to be more involved. The following comment, from Leona, suggests this perception of teachers as gatekeepers, keeping the children from greater participation in the project.

> I don't know how much they are really picking up on how far they could involve us (the Grounds Committee Project) and whether they are really using (the developments) to very much advantage.

Veronica, a parent, also noted that the children had been really interested at the beginning of the project when they were initially asked for input. The decline in children's interest was attributed to the apparent lack of interest by teachers in using the project effectively in the curriculum. She commented:

> I think we have lost momentum because they were really keen. And I suppose that's understandable because a lot of background work had to go on... I am just worried that now we are entering a part where they can be involved again, whether we can build up that momentum again with them.

D. The impact of Negative Feedback

A number of people, both parents and teachers, remarked on the effect, at times, of negative feedback on their enthusiasm for the project. Comments reflected similar sentiments as those expressed below by Joe, a parent, and Gordon, a teacher:

> Narrow minded people have been a barrier, people who want to have their say but don't want to be involved in the whole process, who want to have their say after everyone has been given an opportunity to have a say. The process has been very thorough in giving people the

> opportunity to have their say and I think that's been the only real hiccough with it...
>
> I also found that you get people who will criticise but won't help. You know, they sit back and do nothing, contribute nothing and yet (they) can. It's easy to sit back and do nothing and then throw out a negative comment and then they'll just go back and sit...

However, discussion also focussed on the fact that negative feedback would 'die out' once some obvious changes in the playground had occurred. As Gordon, a committed teacher on the project, commented:

> ... As soon as something happens in the school, that will just die. You won't hear of them anymore. It's hard to handle but it is not a long term influence... People will just forget to criticise and say 'What a great show!' and 'Did I help you?'

In general, participants acknowledged that negative feedback was to be expected and were not unduly perturbed by it. Peter commented that negativism was more likely when changes involved 'different to the usual' strategies and approaches.

> This is radical... It's like any problem you have with a group of people. Unless you have a real common interest which is broader than one aspect, you have problems... So, I'm not surprised that there had been a problem... In fact I am surprised we have got this far...

E. Time Commitments

For those involved in the participatory processes of the project the commitment of significant amounts of time was a real barrier (see extracts from the researcher's journal in Section 4 of the case record). The project was, and continues to be, an added commitment on top of work, family, study and other responsibilities. For some teachers, too, their place of employment is not close to their home which makes commuting for both work and for meetings an added burden. Finding suitable meeting times has presented difficulties. As Cassie, a teacher, stated:

> It is difficult having time, because a lot of people don't like coming back on their weekends... and a lot of parents work full-time and the only time they can come is nights and weekends, so it's a bit tough to get together.

4.41 Discussion

In examining the barriers to involvement that have been identified by the participants, the notion of 'doing things differently' was identified. This Healthy Schools project has challenged both the view of outcomes and the view of the processes about achieving these outcomes. It has reconceptualised the notion of planning in the schoolground, from ad hoc decision making to planning that takes the whole grounds into account and links social and physical aspects of the environment into the planning processes. It has reconceptualised the playground, as more than pieces of fixed equipment. It has illustrated the idea that good solutions take time, in terms of planning, consultation and implementation. The project may even be redefining, for some parents and teachers, the notion of curriculum as inclusive of the outdoors and also of the social relationships between parents, teachers and children.

In terms of the processes of decision making within the parent body of the school, participants perceived that the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project represents a widening of the usual parental decision making base. There has been a real shift of power from the perceived 'vocal minorities' and individuals with 'powerful voices' who have been able to influence decisions, to the inclusion of a wide range of views which are more representative of parents, children and staff in the school.

Parents also perceived that there were some teacher barriers to the project and to parent involvement in decision making. In terms of the challenges to usual decision making processes, this project has enabled parents and to a limited extent, children, to have a voice in decisions that have traditionally been the province of teachers. Even if parents are still tentative about the extent of this power sharing, it is recognised that the inclusion of these new decision making processes has led to much more extensive and appropriate decision making about the grounds than if teachers had been the decision makers alone. However, as has been discussed in Section 4.31, these barriers may not be as extensive as parents have perceived them to be. Nevertheless, in exploring parental perceptions to teacher barriers, it is obvious that they fall into two categories - first, outright opposition to the project and its processes and, second, a lack of interest in it.

Parents have perceived teacher opposition as stemming from a 'teacher as expert' model of curriculum decision making. In this model, parents believe, teachers see themselves as the professionally trained experts who should be allowed to make all decisions to do with learning and the environments in which it occurs. Implicit in this model is the notion that essential learning is that which the teacher provides. Whether intentionally or not, this model of the teacher role devalues the role of parents as children's first teachers or their continuing influence in the education of their children. It also denies the reality of a range of other influences, including the school environment itself, on children's learning. The principal and other teachers indicated that, indeed, this perception of the 'teacher as expert' was, indeed, a valid perception by parents that accounted for teacher resistance and opposition. The principal also indicated that this was a model of the teacher that was more representative of some older teachers on staff.

In terms of perceptions of teacher interest in the project, it was apparent that parents interpreted an apparent lack of interest from teachers as being neutral or negative to the project and its processes. To parents, this lack of interest was demonstrated through non-involvement in the project planning and in terms of missed opportunities for making curriculum links with children. However, the principal indicated that there were a group of teachers who, although not actively engaged with the project, did make positive comments about it and expressed interest in it. In general, there appears to be a lack of appreciation by parents of the complexities of teachers' roles in schools, the demands for change in several areas of the curriculum and school management and that, like parents, teachers have interests and concerns in the school that have specific appeal while other areas, such as grounds redevelopment, may not.

It was felt by some parents, though, that this perceived lack of teacher interest may also have been related to a lack of appreciation of the importance of the outdoor environment of the school in the curriculum. This was seen as being reflected in a lack of experience with playground design, limited use of the outdoors for learning and the fact that the usual playground experiences for teachers, particularly playground duty, were viewed as a chore. Evans (1993:5) comments that "the job of yard duty is essentially a policing task which frequently places teachers in situations where they have to intervene in disputes... (and) administer punishments... which (do) little to engender positive teacher-

pupil relations". There is nothing to suggest that this task is less onerous or appealing to teachers at Ashgrove than it is elsewhere.

However, the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is, perhaps, making a slow but positive contribution to the reconceptualisation of curriculum in the school for some teachers and parents. It is this researcher's belief, based on observation and anecdotal evidence, that curriculum has been narrowly defined by some teachers, particularly those with a 'teacher as expert' model of their professional role. Some parents, also, place such high value on 'inside' classroom learning that playgrounds and the activities and social relations in them are of little consequence. However, this project, which aims to expose the *whole* setting to scrutiny, may assist in redefining curriculum as inclusive of *all* elements of the teaching-learning environment. The project recognises the outdoors as curriculum, indeed the whole 'setting' as curriculum, including the participation of parents, teachers and children in curriculum decision making.

Another process barrier that was perceived by participants in this evaluation relates to some initial difficulties in group formation, within the Grounds Committee itself. This committee was seen as essentially a disparate group of individuals with really only one common interest - a desire to improve the environment for the children in the school. Many parents were relatively new to the school, did not know each other, nor did they know many teachers. Especially in the very early stages, there were difficulties making decisions and keeping both the committee members and the school community informed. Committee members held different perspectives on issues. Few had professional experience with planning, designing or landscaping for play environments. No one had experience in all these areas and not all participants could attend every meeting or workshop. However, creating the 'shared vision' from the inputs from the school community members went a long way towards making this a cohesive group. As within the school community and in the wider experiences of participants, the Grounds Committee members, also, were more accustomed to hierarchical models of management and decision making. The Grounds committee, itself, had to learn to act inclusively and democratically and not allow sectional or individual interests to overshadow collaborative planning.

Negative feedback about the project was another barrier perceived by participants as affecting the motivation for and momentum of the project. This negativism was, at times, debilitating and demoralising. Generally, however, participants recognised that negative comment was to be expected and that ultimately it would 'die out' once the project had some physical evidence to show for its efforts. This negativeness, indeed all levels of uncertainty, resistance and creation of barriers, in many ways is a healthy indicator that a 'paradigm shift' is underway, as new ideas and new ways of operating confront the 'usual ways of doing things'.

A final barrier to participation was the time commitment for participants in attending meetings, workshops and attending to other aspects of the project. Particularly for the co-facilitators, the time inputs have represented a huge cost on themselves and their families, especially as both have been combining the project with study and work. However, all participants have volunteered large amounts of time in attending evening and Saturday planning workshops, meetings and working bees, as well as time involved in informal, but necessary exchanges of information, perceptions and progress reports. The project has also required large numbers of phone calls between participants, government bodies, professional consultants and community groups. Obviously, the engagement of more people into the process is of vital importance to group members, in order to 'share the load' and prevent 'volunteer burnout'. However, the complexity and wide scope of this project, involving whole school responses and whole grounds developments over a possible 10-15 year time frame, makes it advisable that the project seeks alternatives to volunteer management. Perhaps a paid part-time coordinator to facilitate the growth of the project is necessary.

The barriers discussed in this section have been identified by the participants in this evaluation and by the 'insider' reflections of the researcher. However, for the majority of participants, these barriers have not deterred their continuing involvement. In fact, a number of factors in the process itself have emerged as important for sustaining individuals' interest and for maintaining momentum for the project.

4.5 FACTORS THAT MAINTAIN MOTIVATION AND MOMENTUM

Five key factors have been identified by the participants in this evaluation as important in maintaining motivation and momentum. These are:

a) a shared vision
b) committed involvement
c) observable actions
d) resourcing
e) children's involvement

a) The Shared Vision

The shared vision for the creation of a safe, healthy and exciting schoolground was seen as a key element in maintaining the momentum for the project. The vision gave people an opportunity to strive for a common goal with the realisation that its achievement was possibly only by collective effort. As the vision also included democratic ways of decision making, it was seen to provide real possibilities for reform. As Anita and Peter, parent participants, commented:

> It has shown me that all sorts of things are possible.

> It's a great dream. It is a real vision, I think. Dare I say, the dawning of a new age in our school?

It is felt that having the shared vision provided a real impetus to the project. Participants commented that irrespective of who the principal, teachers or parents were in the school, achievement of the vision was greater than any efforts by individuals to resist its implementation. As Joe stated:

> You must be focused and not let go of that focus on the vision.

The importance of the aim or vision becoming enshrined into school policy was also recognised as putting the process beyond the influence of individuals. Julie stated:

> The accepted way to do that is to get it into a framework, a mission statement... get it into policy, making evident the philosophy of the process.

b) Committed Involvement

It was seen that committed involvement was necessary to keep the project going. The commitment of the school principal was recognised and that this support was a key component to the success of the process. Commitment generally across the school community was also important. Gordon, a teacher, noted:

> You need commitment in places of power. I think you need commitment across the school body, too. Maybe not for everybody but some of the parent body and some of the teaching staff and some government bodies as well.

However, the commitment of the coordinators was seen as *essential*, especially in the initial stages. Comments from parent participants, Joe and Peter reflected on this aspect of the project:

> It's the initiators of the project that are the key people and in order for the project to be a success the initiators have to see it through from start to finish because when the initiators drop out, if it's at an early stage, just in the embryo stage, you find that the enthusiasm of a lot of other people will drop out too... .

> If Sue and Julie hadn't been driving it then the whole thing wouldn't have got this far. In any sort of set-up like this where you have a lot of volunteers, what you really need is some sort of central co-ordinator... it just gets too hard for people who are doing it part-time.

The coordinators also realised the value of each other's participation. The idea of sharing the workload, having a 'critical friend' to assist reflection and evaluation and to gain perspective on what was happening and what was being said, was invaluable. Also knowing that another like-minded person was available to continue the project when commitments necessitated a reduction in personal effort, was essential to this facilitator's continued participation and commitment.

c) Demonstrating Observable Actions

There was an awareness that, although the project was complex and that good results could not be achieved quickly, the demonstration of some observable actions in the school grounds was vital. These were needed to maintain interest in the project within the wider school community and to cut short some of the negative criticism.

Comments related to this aspects of the project have been recorded in Section 4.41. Additionally, the following comment was made by Gordon:

> ... that is why some people are feeling discomfort with it, because it has been such a big thing and there has been a lot of money spent on it and it has been such a long process, but people are just fed up with it as nothing seems to have happened.

d) Resourcing for the Project

While there was a desire for there to be adequate resourcing for the project, the issue of funding was not seen as pivotal to the project's overall development. There was widespread recognition that the *participants* were the greatest resource that the project had available to it. In fact, it was commented upon by Peter that initially, at least, a lack of funding had essential benefits. Resourcing does remain an issue, however. He said:

> ... if you have a lack of funds it produces innovation. You think about more cost effective solutions...(but) it just makes the project so much harder to finish if you are all the time thinking about how much it is going to cost you, and can you support it, and how are you going to raise the funds, and how many more cake stalls are you going to have to make.

There was also a recognition that high levels of funding for the project may not have led to participation by the school community, as outside services could have been obtained to complete the tasks that were performed by volunteers. However, it was recognised that, in the long term, the sustainability of the project was likely to suffer if a paid coordinator position was not created, for as Peter noted, "it gets too hard for people who are doing it part-time".

e) Children's Involvement

The participation of children in the decision making processes of the project and in involvement with the developments was also seen as important, especially by parents. In fact, children's involvement, or potential for this, was important to maintaining parental momentum. It was recognised that child involvement had been limited to date, but there was certainly an expectation that this would and should increase. Not only

would it increase parental motivation but increased children's involvement was seen as adding new life to the project itself. As Peter said:

> How do we build momentum? By allowing (the children) to participate actively in what we are doing. Kids' constructions and things... to give kids a chance to build stuff or do stuff. It builds the interest as well... in a way, that becomes part of the education.

4.51 Discussion

This discussion centres on the factors that participants have identified as important to overcoming barriers, maintaining motivation and momentum for the project.

Of pivotal importance was 'the shared vision' which integrated the individual concerns and ideas for improvement of the school environment and deliberately focused on the *possibilities* for the school rather than the operating constraints. Articulating that vision became the collective task of the Grounds Committee and served to unite the group and focus attention on the need for a whole grounds redevelopment. This orientation towards an achievable outcome for the Grounds Committee served both as motivation for continued participation, and as support for the general planning processes with the achievement of an 'endpoint' for the project, a number of years down the track.

The commitment of key people was recognised as essential for maintaining motivation and the momentum of the project. Specifically mentioned was the support of the principal and the continuing participation of the co-facilitators as well as the involvement of participants from different sectors of the school. Rappaport (1976:211) discusses a number of strategies and tactics that enhance social change in organisations. One of these involves the 'principle of participation' where as many groups within an organisation as possible are involved. Another is the 'principle of group action' where members come from any status level. These principles, he indicates, are important for creating and sustaining innovative change. Clearly, these principles have been recognised in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project as relevant, too. Involved in the developments have been parents, teachers, some children, the principal, members of the Parents' and Citizen's Association executive, and a number of other community groups and associations

The importance of 'actionable first steps', to borrow the terminology of Chamala and Mortiss (1990:45), demonstrated by physical changes in the school grounds, was recognised as important for maintaining momentum in the project. Chamala and Mortiss comment that the lack of these initial actions can make the experience of a project more hazardous and appear more uncoordinated than perhaps it is. Participants in the project knew that visible actions would eventually result, and that planning, was thorough and effective, even if rather a long process. However, it was recognised that others in the school community needed physical demonstrations of change in order to keep faith with the change processes. It is likely that a large part of the criticism directed at the project would not have arisen had there been some earlier demonstration of change in the school grounds.

The issue of resourcing for the project was raised as a factor pertinent to the project's development. However, contrary to expectations, this was not a general call for more funding to be made available to the project. Certainly, schools are used to operating within tight budgetary limits and in many ways are experienced at harnessing resources from the community to meet their needs, and this project has been no exception. In fact the project has been able to bring considerable funding and services into the school, because the project has been *explicitly* a participatory community process. Participants recognise that the value of the project rests with the people who are collectively working for change. Rappaport (1976:210) claims that this is translated to 'where there's a will there is a way!' and that the problem of scarce resources can be forgotten if efforts are directed to finding someone in the institution with the will, and helping that person to organise and create a group for change, based on action. This has certainly been the experience of those working in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. However, the position of the co-ordinator/s was discussed in terms of needing an allocation of specific funding as recognition of the complexity of the task and the long-term nature of the project.

Finally, the involvement of children in the project was seen as a key motivating influence for maintaining momentum for the project. Parents, particularly, recognised the possibilities for greater children's involvement in the processes of the project. Generally speaking, teachers saw children's involvement in terms of them as users of the

finished product - the changed play environment. The practicality of the teachers' perspective combined with the idealism of parents may, hopefully, result in more effective participation for children with both the processes and the physical developments arising from the changes.

4.6 EVIDENCE OF A SHIFT OF BALANCE

The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project has now been in operation for two years. The obvious evidence that the project is 'doing things differently' is in the outcomes already achieved in this relatively short period - a sun safety policy, a whole grounds plan, Phase 1 of a Junior Playground planned and completed and a supportive environment committee established. However, not only have there been these more obvious examples of the shift, but more subtle indicators are also present. The Healthy Schools project is co-ordinated by parents who are equal partners with teachers in its budget deliberations and who consult with outside agencies autonomously. Parents from this committee are members of the current Collaborative School Review Panel that is overseeing the review process of school operations. In this review, aspects of the physical and social environment of the school are being examined in three of the four review areas that have been determined by the school community (see researcher responses to these reviews in Section 4 of the case record). It appears that the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is contributing to an awareness in the school community of the importance of these aspects in the total educational experience provided by school.

In tandem with this project, as has been mentioned, are the processes for change towards greater power sharing that have been initiated by the Department of Education. The Principal's Report to the Annual General Meeting of the Parents' and Citizens' Association of the 23/2/93 (see Section 3 of the case record) alluded to these changes and recognised the contribution of the Grounds Committee as part of these. The initial passage of this report is as follows:

> The move in educational institutions to involve the community in their overall operations has gathered momentum over the past twelve months. Such a change, must, by its very nature cause some problems and make more complex, procedures previously followed. Theoretically this in

> itself should improve the institution as it makes those involved look more closely at their organisation and the procedures followed.
>
> There is no doubt that our school is experiencing some of these problems and complexities. However, 1992 saw increased community involvement and hopefully a better understanding by those involved...

The 1993 and 1994 Prospectus documents of the school also make reference to the devolutionary processes that are occurring in the school (see Section 3 of the case record for extracts). In the forward to the 1993 document the principal stated:

> As we move into the nineties educational institutions are inviting their communities to have greater input. For this to work effectively there is a need to engender an environment of open communication between the institution and its community. Open communication will develop a better understanding of the educational process by all who are involved and consequently better equip our children to deal with their future.

The principal has publicly recognised of the Grounds Committee and its activities as contributing to the processes of devolution, and as an example of teachers, parents and community members working together to improve the school environment. This provides evidence of the more subtle ways in which the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is contributing to the re-alignment of power relations and changing the decision making practices in the school.

In fact the principal commented in interview that the process of collaborative decision making has reached the point, with the Grounds Committee at least, where the process of equitable power sharing is well in train. He commented that:

> As parents get the ability to drive the processes themselves I can be a side-line person. I won't have to attend every meeting about things that are happening. I might go to one in six and just have input. I might be shown the results of (deliberations) and asked for input. I would be just another person to consult and not necessarily a person who is conceived of as being the apex... I am on the same level as everyone else on the staff of the school here and the parents.

This confidence in the ability of parents to participate and organise in the school is anticipated to increase as levels of trust between parents and teachers develop. That

parents hold 'a balanced view' that is not going to affect adversely the trust or philosophy of the school, has first to be demonstrated. The principal then commented:

> I will know immediately when parents approach me and say "We are going to be a steering committee". I will be able to say "Ok, yes you can have a hand in it. You are not going to upset the philosophy of the school. Go for it".

These comments exemplify the proposition made by Vincent that decision making is often restricted by power-holders who allow it to operate only in those directions they deem acceptable. However, they do reflect a move towards greater democracy in the school. Radical change, in the short-term at least, was never an option for this school, with its relatively conservative constituency of parents, teachers and children. The processes of change, however, are in train and 'grassroots' change has been created by the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, in conjunction with the devolutionary processes that are under way in all schools in Queensland. The fact that reaction to these changes is generally positive, that enthusiasm is high, that outcomes are obvious, that confidence is building, that collaborative decision making is occurring is a significant achievement in the space of two years.

4.61 Discussion

It is obvious that innovative change that is observable and tangible has resulted from the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. A published sun safety policy is one example, as is the new Junior Playground now in operation.

However, evidence that the decision making processes to achieve these outcomes have changed is less tangible. One measure of this change, though, is in the kind of involvement that parents are having in the school. The application of Marsh's parent participation continuum places current activities of parents engaged with the Grounds Committee firmly at the 'active' end, with parents as active decision-makers. Parents have been both the initiators and coordinators of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project - a committee that includes the principal, parents and teachers. Parents coordinate the activities of the Grounds Committee. A teacher and a parent jointly coordinate the Supportive Environment Committee. The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project committee oversees its own budget and the parent

coordinators liaise freely with Department of Education and other government personnel, with politicians and the wider community, including the media, with the confidence of the principal.

While there exist the traditional kinds of involvement for parents - working bees, maintenance coordination - as has been illustrated, the range of activities has expanded considerably. Within the school, the project team writes regularly in the school newsletter to educate parents and teachers alike about the project - its processes, aims and ideals. As well, there is regular input of current literature to staff members from the parent coordinators, on topics and issues that intersect with the project. The informal networks between teachers and parents and administration due to their closer relationships through joint work on the project are leading to greater liaison, exchange and understanding.

In terms of the Collaborative School Review, it is quite evident that the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project has placed issues to do with the school environment firmly on the agenda for the school. It appears that the opportunities for critiquing existing school operations and creating change, that have been encouraged through the project are having flow-on effects into the formal review and development processes of the school. Recently, there has been liaison between the Year 1 teachers and the Grounds Committee about the use of the new flexible play equipment. A letter, jointly signed by teachers and the Grounds Committee facilitators, was disseminated to parents, inviting parental assistance with this equipment. This was a public demonstration of Grounds Committee members and teachers collaborating in 'curriculum', another indication that decision making is becoming a shared responsibility.

The experience of power sharing practice can be a 'leap into uncertainty' that can be especially difficult for teachers whose "traditional role has rested so heavily on being expert, being an authority, having all the answers" (Greig, Pike and Selby,1989:62). As the Principal's report, at the beginning of 1993, to the Parents' and Citizens' Association indicated, the feelings of increased complexity and problems as a result of shared decision making are part of the current environment of the school but provide evidence that change is underway. This is generating uncertainty, but for some this

this leads to excitement. For others, there is resistance. Both teachers and parents are experiencing this uncertainty as the project creates changes. For some teachers, their traditional role as 'expert' is challenged. For some parents, the project impinges upon parents' perceptions of appropriate roles for parents and challenges the traditional views of what is important parental activity. As Greig, Pike and Selby (1989:62) state, though, "the paradox is that we live in an age of overwhelming uncertainty and to recognise this can be profoundly liberating".

Certainly, those parents and teachers who have embraced the project are much more positive and excited about the process and its possibilities. There have been personal rewards through greater sharing and valuing of their own and others' abilities, efforts and ideas. It is apparent that there is a greater recognition by parents of the complexities of teaching and the management of schools, and a greater valuing of the roles of parents in decision making in the school context.

4.7 POTENTIAL FOR PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE IN THE SCHOOL

The process of collaborative decision making is at its beginnings in this school. However, there is considerable enthusiasm regarding its potential. This centres around the improvements in understanding between school community members, particularly between those of different status levels, the potential for involving children and expanding curriculum links, the potential for critiquing and developing other facets of the school and the potential for modelling democratic, participative practice in life.

Improved Understanding

In terms of how the shift in decision making is perceived in the school community, it is obvious that responses to change are highly personal experiences. While a general feeling of uncertainty prevails, and in spite of some barriers and hurdles, the experiences of participants in the Healthy Schools project have been mainly positive and enthusiastic, especially in terms of the development of personal relationships and understanding. The principal, particularly, remarked:

> From a personal point of view I think it has allowed me to get to know a number of the parents better... . It has allowed them to see me in a

> different light... to (overcome) their feelings about principals from the past... .

He also recognised that the process:

> ... has had a unifying effect on a particular group of people in the school community and I think it has been good for both sides.

The project has enabled many people in the school community to get to know each other. Brian, a parent, summed up the feelings of participants when he commented:

> I think it has been satisfying and definitely worthwhile... . I've also found it very good just meeting people, getting to know the headmaster. In fact, I hardly knew any parent or any teachers at all until this and then suddenly you have a group of people who you're quite friendly with and you know a lot about how the school is run, a lot more.

Children's involvement

Parents had been conscious, to some degree, of lost opportunities for children's involvement in the project. This was affirmed in the comments from Lorna, a specialist teacher, who noted that generally the children should be asked more about things in the school as "they seem to come last in most decisions". However, there was a recognition, especially from teachers, of the potential for greater children's participation in the future. In relation to the playground itself, Cassie, a teacher, recognised that:

> we need to be willing to listen to what (the children) have to say about it, because they are the ones who have to play down there every day and use it. I think we need to open ourselves a bit more to that and listen to their feedback and see if we can change some areas to suit them a bit better.

The Student Council was recognised, too, as a potential source for tapping into children's perceptions of the school environment. The opportunities were recognised for facilitating a real sense of responsibility and purpose for these children and for the children in the school, generally.

Curriculum Links

The potential for linking aspects of the playground redevelopment with curriculum was clearly recognised by the teachers. The completed Junior Playground, especially, enabled many opportunities for teachers to make these links. Cassie enthused:

> (There are) lots of possibilities there. A lot of exploration in the maths area we can do down there... and all sorts of obstacle courses for phys.ed. And science, with sand sculptures, with the water play area, and gardens... and with the greenhouse down there...

Karen recognised that some inservice activities exploring the potential of the Junior Playground would be useful to assist teachers to make the best use of the area, so that it did not become simply a play area for children's lunch breaks. This acknowledged that an expansion of curriculum ideas to incorporate the outdoors is needed by some teachers.

Other School Links

There was a general consensus that the processes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project could be applied in a wide range of areas in the school. Some of these related to specific projects within the grounds, such as the proposed multi-purpose covered area, others related to using the process in other areas of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, such as the Supportive School Environment activities.

However, there was also a recognition that shared decision making, incorporating opportunities for input and feedback from a wide cross-section of the school community, could also be applied to other aspects of the school's activities and practices, perhaps even as a general approach to decision making within the school, that has been modelled by the Healthy Schools project. Julie commented:

> ... It's the fact that we have modelled the process that we are going through. We don't have to have expertise in all areas, but we have kept going and have always demonstrated to people that we are not (experts) but we are managing... We are one of you and we have the same sort of adequacies and inadequacies as anybody else but we can still keep doing this together.

Modelling Democracy

There is this recognition that the project, in a small way, is modelling democratic practice for both adults and children, that it is transforming decision making from hierarchy to collaboration. Graham, a teacher, commented:

> One thing about the kids I think is really important is about modelling behavior for them... about everyone having a say... . I think there's a certain number (of children) who will be aware that this is how this project's been taking place. It's this concept of everyone having a say, and it's alright to say no, and it's alright to agree and disagree. I think that's a really important thing to model the behaviour of a democracy and I think that's what this process is all about... . It's empowering kids. Because some kids are seeing that actually happening ... if they're seeing their parents attending meetings, when they grow up then they are more likely to attend meetings and do their bit, or have their say and not let the world walk over them. You know how to go about things so to me that's the empowering bit.

4.71 Discussion

In terms of the potential for further participatory practice in the school, these findings uncovered three areas. The first concerned the potential that the development of better interpersonal relationships can have in the school. This was not just in relation to people getting to know each other better as individuals but also a deeper understanding of the roles that people hold. The capacity for knowing more deeply, the concerns, interests and constraints on people involved in the school has helped to develop more realistic appreciations of the conditions in which people operate and their personal capacities for change. In many ways, these participatory processes uncover those aspects of an organisation that keep people and institutions from changing while allowing the processes of support, negotiation and collaboration to focus on overcoming these barriers and hurdles. Obviously, improved relationships between individuals and between people of different status levels enable the participatory processes to uncover further individual and operational barriers and opportunities in the school. As trust develops and people grow more confident, perhaps there will be less chance of misinterpretation, negativism and resistance when, the next time, possibilities are raised and practices are challenged.

There is perceived to be considerable potential for increased children's participation in the project and this was recognised by both teachers and parents. Parents, particularly, would like to see children involved in more of the planning of the project itself. Teachers certainly recognise that children's views can be further utilised, especially in terms of their needs for play and activity in the outdoors. Recent surveying about the buildings and grounds for the Collaborative School Review has responded to this need for greater children's inputs and children's views have been actively sought. The future development of a upper grades playground, that is mooted by the Grounds Committee, also anticipates that greater children's participation in planning would occur. As another initiative of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, it is to be expected that this group would seek to build upon the small beginnings and experiences of the first two years of the project and expand this aspect in future developments.

The potential for greater curriculum links with the completed playground was enthusiastically endorsed by the teachers. Some teachers were able to see these links clearly. Others expressed the need for inservice activities to assist them. This is evidence that the creation of an inviting, diverse 'learnscape' within the school can create a broadening of teachers (and parents) views about appropriate curriculum for children. The opportunities for developing environmental education curricula *for* the environment and innovative health curricula are enhanced as a result of the early achievements of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project.

There is also a recognition that the processes modelled in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project have applicability in other facets of the school. Specifically mentioned were the behavior management policy and formal reporting procedures as areas to which the participatory model could be applied. Further, as a 'non-expert' model, it may provide encouragement to other parents and teachers that, with collective action, they, too, can create changes. A participative model is also being utilised in the Collaborative School Review, currently underway, with parents and teachers participating in committees and engaging in surveying and reporting on parent, teacher and children's attitudes to various aspects of the school environment and curriculum. This gives wider acceptance to the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project model as it is being reinforced and legitimated by the formal review processes.

Finally, there is the recognition that the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, through its modelling of participatory decision making in the school context is making a contribution, however small and localised, to the development of processes and practices of democratic community. These participatory processes are seen as 'empowering' individuals and, at the same time, serving the integrative function of increasing the feeling that individuals 'belong' to their community (Rizvi,1986:37). The project is modelling for the school community that change is possible and that positive outcomes can result from collective action. It is believed that these practices of active engagement in democratic decision making will assist all citizens, adults and children alike, to confront the social and environmental challenges of the present and to create sustainable and just options for the future.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination. (Commission For The Future, Australia - 1989)

5.0 INTRODUCTION

This study has been an evaluation of aspects of participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, a participatory action research project. It represents but part of the continuing, regular evaluations and reflections, many of which are unrecorded, that have been and continue to be integral to the project and have been already integrated into planning and actions. Consequently, not all the findings that emerge through this evaluation have a discrete origin in this evaluation. They represent an accumulation of ideas, reflections, perceptions and evaluations that have resulted from two years of facilitation and participation in the project and many more years as a teacher, parent and educator in schools and early childhood settings.

The desire to investigate participation in the project grew initially from some concern that participation levels were not as extensive as one, indeed, would have hoped. However, the study has illuminated a number of personal, but mainly structural barriers that provide explanations for this. The researcher, in fact, now feels, in the words of Peter, a parent respondent in the initial focus group interview, "I'm surprised we have got this far!" Rather than feeling that the project is in danger of folding due to a lack of wide participation in the activities of the Grounds Committee and too-heavy reliance on the inputs of the facilitators, this evaluation has given confidence that the achievements in just two years are considerable, that the project *is* just in its infancy and that participation will continue to grow. The recent completion of Stage 1 of the Junior Playground and the support and favourable comments from teachers, parents and the delight of the children in using the facilities has already indicated that this is so. The recent surveying of the school community regarding the school buildings and grounds for the current Collaborative School Review has also offered considerable support for and confirmed the planning directions of the Grounds Committee. As researcher and

co-facilitator of the project, *my* confidence in the project and the processes of participatory action research have greatly increased as a result of this evaluation.

Specifically, the study has sought to uncover the reasons that prompted participation in the project, the structural barriers to this and perceptions of the process, including barriers and aspects that promote and maintain participation. Evidence has also been sought of a shift of balance in decision making as a result of the participatory processes employed in the project and explores further opportunities for participatory activity. This chapter presents a summary of the research findings related to each of these areas and also comments on the effect of this evaluation on this action research project. Additionally, it provides a synthesis of the study by examining the implications of this research for continuation of the process of change at Ashgrove and the potential for the process in wider contexts. In so doing it also answers the final research question of this evaluation:

> What can be learned about participatory action research that assists the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project and may inform other schools and the community about the process?

5.1 RESEARCH SUMMARY

This section provides an overview of the findings of this study. It has seven parts: motivations for participation, structural barriers to involvement, perceptions of the process, perceived barriers to participation, important aspects that build momentum, evidence of a shift in decision making and the opportunities for expansion of participatory processes within the school.

5.11 Motivations for Participation

People need good reasons to become involved in change. Parents participated in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project chiefly because of their perceptions of the physical and social short-comings of the school setting. The conjunction of the existing environment with the ones remembered from their own school days and the disjunction of the school experience with the pre-school experiences of themselves and their children, provided strong motivation for change. An increased environmental awareness at a community and societal level also motivated participants. This is

especially true of the co-facilitators of the project who were confident that health and environmental issues could be addressed positively and at the local level. Their belief that schools, generally, encourage conformity and resist change, but *can* be important in shifting values and practices towards those that lead to healthy and sustainable futures, is recognised by both facilitators as key elements in their own participation.

Teachers, while responding to the degraded physical environment of the school, also became involved because the project provided a way to put into practice the processes of devolution that are now required within the public school system in this state. While this motivation may have external origins, it is nonetheless a real one for schools, their administration and teachers. Finally, the Healthy Schools process itself provided a motivation for participation through the articulation of a set of action steps for implementing change through democratic decision making. This meant that the concerns of parents in relation to the school environment and the concerns of teachers in relation to devolution could be addressed through the same democratic approach.

5.12 Structural Barriers to Involvement

The existing structures of the school, including the architecture, organisational patterns and modes of decision making, were seen as barriers to greater participatory decision making. These elements act to reinforce stakeholders 'sense of place' in the school hierarchy. For parents and, ironically, for children, this place is firmly at the margins of decision making in the school. This 'sense of place' is reinforced, for parents, by remembrances of their own schooling, particularly where the atmosphere, physical structural appearance and modes of furnishing have changed little since their own school days.

This 'sense of place' is also reinforced by the lack of role models for parents, either from their own parents or from parents who are currently in the school. The traditional roles of parents, working at the request of individual teachers, rather than by planned policy, fulfilling traditional fund-raising and related roles as orchestrated by the school Parents' and Citizens' Association, have kept parent involvement in schools within confined limits. Endorsing the hierarchically determined decisions of teachers and administration, rather than acting as a parental voice of critique of school practices and policy, seems

usual practice. In fact, it seems that Parents' and Citizens' Associations serve to legitimate a marginal role for parents in schools.

5.13 Perceptions of the Process

It is recognised that there is a continuum of attitude about power sharing in schools, ranging from negative to highly positive. Participants, both parents and teachers involved in the processes of change, were generally supportive and enthusiastic of the changes that were occurring. It would appear that participation, itself, provides the insight to discover the opportunities and potential for democratic decision-making. Non-involvement, it seems, appears to entrench negative views. Even though parents may have interpreted lack of involvement by teachers as a demonstration of negativism, it was apparent that teachers generally were more positive about the changes than parents thought. This raises the issue of effective, open communication in maintaining interest and motivation.

5.14 Perceived Barriers to the Process

The negative reactions that did arise resulted from confronting the 'usual way of doing things' and relate both to the outcomes and the processes of change. There is a dynamic tension between the desire to 'do something quickly' and the desire to plan, reconceptualise and act in careful and deliberately participative ways. These tensions manifest themselves in negative, resistant behaviors. For parents, it was felt that these tensions derived from confronting of the notion of 'teachers as experts', that is, of teachers who hold a narrowly-defined view of curriculum. It was felt, also, that some teachers, while not obviously negative to the project, were disinterested and this manifested itself as limited children's involvement with the project.

Even within the Grounds Committee, there were initial difficulties of group cohesion as this group of disparate individuals worked through the processes of collaboration. As with the community generally, even these committed participants were more familiar with hierarchical, 'expert' and adversarial management approaches, than with collaborative, collegial and democratic decision making. The impact of these barriers, as well as the negative feedback that was evident, created additional barriers and

uncertainty for participants and acted to slow the momentum of the processes of change.

5.15 Aspects that Maintain and Build Momentum

The examination of the participatory processes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, however, has also revealed that there are a number of aspects of the process itself that have maintained and built momentum for the project. The importance of a 'shared vision' was seen as a critical component of participation. This gave participants an aim, derived from their own concerns and viewpoints, but which had the validation of the whole school community. As a result, activities were able to be conducted within a framework that reflected general opinion.

The commitment of a cross-section of members of the school community was also important, especially that of the principal and the facilitators. It was acknowledged that these facilitators were pivotal for gathering and maintaining momentum for the process, especially in the initial stages. However, it was also recognised that these efforts are difficult to maintain, particularly in such a complex and long-term project. The sharing of the facilitation load with a 'critical friend' was seen as important by the facilitators. There was a general recognition that for the long term sustainability of the project, alternatives to volunteer coordination need to be investigated.

Demonstration of some concrete evidence of change was identified as a key factor in maintaining momentum and interest. It was recognised that reconceptualising the school grounds and changing a school culture regarding parental participation are slow processes. However, the value of some short-term physical changes became obvious and especially so for people not directly involved. For these parents and teachers, conspicuous changes provide evidence that the commitment of school funds and teachers' and parents' time is worthwhile. Active participants were philosophical and aware of the depth and breadth of change, but others in the school community needed reassurance that change was indeed occurring. In essence, they wanted to see that there was 'value for money'.

Resourcing was another important factor in maintaining momentum. However, funding was not a primary concern. The Healthy Schools process has actually generated funds

into the school for the project. However, the human resources, people actively and collectively working together, were recognised as far more important than actual funding. In fact, it was recognised that funding could work against the innovation and creativity of the project. There was a recognition, though, that funding to assist with the coordination of the project may be necessary. Continuing reliance on volunteer efforts for coordination may be unrealistic due to the length and complexity of the project.

Another key impetus to maintaining momentum for the project was the potential for children's participation. This was particularly important to parents who saw the opportunities for the project to widen the curriculum of the school and to make more evident to children the ideas and workings of participatory democracy. The teachers were more circumspect in their views as to the kinds of involvement that were possible. For them, involvement of children related more to the usage of the completed works of the project than to participation in the decisions and actions along the way. In general, however, both teachers and parents anticipated an increased role for children in future developments of the project.

5.16 Evidence of a shift in Balance in Decision-making

Change in the decision making processes of the school *is* evident. The obvious successes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project - the sun safety policy, the whole grounds plan, the Junior Playground and the Supportive School Environment Committee - all demonstrate that much has happened in the past two years. However, there are changes that are much less tangible and less obvious than the production of new policy documents or the building of a new playground. Evidence of change is reflected in the kinds of committees that parents now participate in and the roles that they hold within these. It is also reflected in the degree of autonomy that parents enjoy in dealing with and on behalf of the school community. The formation of stronger networks between teachers and parents demonstrates that democratic processes are at work, with shared understandings and better relationships apparent between existing status levels within the school.

Uncertainty comes with this shift of balance, too, as members of the school community are confronted by new ideas and ways of operating. This uncertainty may be demonstrated as negativism or apparent lack of interest by those whose traditional authority is being challenged. It may be manifested as tentativeness by those who are seizing the opportunity to participate effectively. Regardless, uncertainty indicates that change is underway. For those who have embraced the changes, uncertainty is still apparent, but with a growing spirit of collegiality, excitement and confidence.

5.17 Opportunities for Expanding the Process Within the School

There is a recognition that the democratic decision making processes initiated by the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project have application to many other aspects of the school's operation. Specifically mentioned was the possibility for participative processes in developing a new reporting system in the school and the development of a new behavior management strategy. There is the obvious application for increasing children's participation in decision making in the school. There are the potential curriculum links, especially with innovative environmental education and health education curricula, and a continuing reconceptualisation of curriculum to include the outdoor environment and, indeed, the whole school setting as relevant to the lives of children in school. There is also the potential that the overt modelling of participative democracy for both adults and children will begin the necessary changes towards collective, affirming actions that, as a society, are needed to overcome the social and ecological problems that are increasingly more commonplace. Perbaps, too, these practices will help create futures that are healthful, sustainable and just.

5.2 THE INFLUENCE OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY ON THE PROJECT

One of the values of engaging in this 'insider' evaluation is that the findings and reflections about participation have already impacted upon the project to some degree. It is not possible to suspend action, plans and reviews in the whole project while this particular, more formal evaluation has taken place. In some ways, too, these findings are already dated, as they have been considered by the facilitators and shared with group members informally. This highlights one of the difficulties with this kind of evaluation.

Another is that carrying out an evaluation of a more formal nature impacts upon the forward movement of the project for which the evaluation is being done. At times this evaluation has almost stalled the project - after all, it is still in its infancy. As the study has found, the facilitators, even in participatory projects, are key players in their success, especially in the early stages. One the other hand, the depth of understanding about participation that this evaluation has offered, compared with that of the more informal, less deliberate evaluations that have usually occurred, provides the project participants, and the facilitators in particular, with a greater level of confidence when taking actions and making plans.

This evaluation has been conducted *for* the group who owns the project. The results of this evaluation *will* be returned to the members of the Grounds Committee and to the school community at large. Their comments and critique of the findings and discussion will further contribute to this participatory action research and the emancipatory process. Indeed, the evaluative process, especially the shared experiences of the focus groups, has already benefited the project. 'Insider' knowledge would indicate that the opportunity for participants in these sessions to meet informally, free of the usual 'work' of the Grounds Committee, to discuss the project, share perceptions and concerns and create better understandings of its purposes and goals has fostered greater collegiality and personal understanding. Fostering a supportive social environment for sharing perceptions, it would seem, creates further opportunities for uncovering additional barriers to and perceptions of the project that will enhance its continued development.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

This section answers the final question of this evaluation. It examines the implications of the findings for the project, and places these into a wider social context. In so doing, it also serves to synthesise this report. These implications are explored in three sub-sections. The first concerns the Ashgrove Healthy School Project itself, the second relates to the Ashgrove school community generally and the third discusses the implications of these findings for other schools and other communities.

5.31 Implications for the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project

A number of implications for the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project have emerged as a result of this evaluation and the reflections on the process that have been a part of the project for the past two years. These relate to the coordination of and communication processes within the project, the legitimising of the Healthy Schools process into the formal planning and development processes of the school and the potential for new approaches to curriculum to make greater links between the Healthy Schools approach and children's learning.

a) Coordination

Coordinating the project through a paid part-time coordinator should be seriously considered. This has implications for the sustainability of the project in the long term. The recognition that this project involves grounds redevelopment, curriculum reorientation, devolution and community development indicates the scope and potential of the process but also its complexity. The coordinators have committed huge amounts of time and effort to the project. In this initial phase, this has involved laying the foundations in all aspects of the project, particularly the development of the whole school plan, the redevelopment of the Junior playground and the fostering of the processes of shared decision-making. However, all these and other aspects of the project need to be consolidated and further developed. The coordinators are volunteers, both are in paid employment (one full-time) and both have young families and other regular demands upon their energies and time.

b) Communication

Communication channels between project participants and the rest of the school need to be constantly examined for openness and clarity. Parents feel tentative in terms of their new role in decision making for which there is no precedent. Teachers, to some degree, feel defensive about power sharing after years of institutional management has entrenched their autonomy and power in school decision-making. Parents' perceptions of teacher barriers to the project may have been reduced had parents been aware that teachers were generally supportive of the Healthy Schools project. When criticisms, from either teachers or parents, become the predominant form of feedback, it can be expected that tensions mount and uncertainty prevails. Mechanisms for relaying

positive comments are also needed to maintain enthusiasm for continued participation in the project.

c) Children's Involvement

For parents involved in the Healthy School project, the participation of children in the decision making processes, in the activities associated with the developments and as users of the 'finished product', is a major motivation for their own continued participation. To some degree, parents have been disappointed that teachers have not more explicitly used the project to make curriculum links. However, one suspects that greater utilisation of the project has occurred that has been obvious. Nevertheless, as parents see the modelling of participatory decision making and involvement in this as important for children in learning new strategies and skills for creating viable futures, an enhancement of children's participation is highly desirable. Further legitimising of the Healthy Schools process into the School Development Plan and developing new curricula in relation to this would go a long way towards this expansion of children's participation.

d) Legitimising the Healthy Schools Process

It is important that the Healthy Schools approach be incorporated into the next School Development Plan. At the moment the project is an initiative of the Grounds Committee of the Parents' and Citizens' Association. This does not confer great status or significance to the project or the processes used. The incorporation of Healthy Schools into the next School Development Plan would signal to the school community that the innovation is being 'routinized' into the usual functioning of the school, whereby, as Muncey and McQuillan (1993:412) state, the "organisation contracts and maintains responsibility for the preservation of the doctrine". This would greatly legitimate the project and the processes of reform into the school's agenda. Potentially, this would neutralise some of the negativism of resistant parents and teachers that has affected the momentum of the project.

e) Curriculum Development

The incorporation of the Healthy School process into the School Development Plan has implications for curriculum development in the school. The project has shown that

greater participation of parents in curriculum decision making is possible and effective. The promotion of greater participation by children, recognised at least by parents as inadequate within the project and within the decision making processes of the school in general, can be addressed through stronger curriculum links. A curriculum *for* the environment, with its action orientation, would reinforce participatory decision making processes, thus enabling the links between the parents, teachers, children and the wider community to be further strengthened. Innovative environmental education and/or health promotion curricula which emphasise integrated, contextualised learning would enhance the capacity of the project to enliven other aspects of curricula in the school and for these curricula to broaden and develop the project in meaningful ways.

5.32 Implications of the Findings for the School Community

These findings about participation in the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project have a number of implications for the Ashgrove School community, generally. Chief amongst these is a recognition that the participatory processes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project is shifting the paradigm in relation to decision making practice within the school. The school is in a period of transition. The hierarchical organisational structures that have served the school for its lengthy history are being challenged from above, through devolution, as well as from below, through parental concern about aspects of the school environment. Just one of these makes for uncertainty and tension. Having both at the same time could put enormous stress on those caught between the two sets of changes - principally the school administration and the teachers.

However, one thing is certain. Change is inevitable and resistance to change will make the process more difficult, both for the school community and for the individuals concerned. The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project offers a way for the school community to embrace these changes through the one project. With its emphasis on critique and change through cooperation, sharing and support, the project is a learning experience for everyone. This study and the reflections of an 'insider' to the project clearly show that those teachers who are involved in the project are positive, enthusiastic about the changes and can see the potential for linking the project with other aspects of the curriculum. Those 'good' things that teachers have always done to

support children and parents in education are made more apparent. Their relationships with parents are friendly, comfortable and yet their professionalism is reinforced, not undermined.

For parents, seizing the opportunities for initiating and participating in change in the school has been exciting. The chance to interact meaningfully with teachers on behalf of their children is greatly appreciated. The project, through the close liaison of parents with teachers and administration, has provided parents with a much better and deeper understanding of the roles of teachers and the complexities of teaching and managing a school. However, big efforts have been expended simply confronting the hierarchical structures of the school and countering resistance and negativism, as the decision making processes have shifted from the 'usual' locus of control towards the inclusion of parents who have traditionally been marginal to it. A recognition that parents have skills and interests that are of value in a changing school environment, and that can and will be utilised, builds confidence and support for the school.

For children, the real beneficiaries of these processes of participation, they have had a safer, more diverse and stimulating school environment created for them. The development of the 'outdoor classroom' will have benefits during play periods and at other times throughout the day as teachers take advantage of this new teaching and learning resource. Children, particularly those whose parents or teachers have taken an active interest in the project, are also learning the lessons of participatory democracy. They are learning that participation, commitment and actions by people working collectively are at the heart of social and environmental change. Through this modelling, and hopefully through a recognition by more teachers and parents of the long-term benefits of children's greater participation in the project, children can come to practise participation and actions for themselves.

5.33 Implications of the Findings for Other Schools and the Community

At their broadest level, these findings indicate that it is possible to create positive change in schools and that groups who have traditionally been marginalised by the organisational practices and hierarchical structures can initiate and generate the change processes. Initially, the processes of engagement in shared decision making may seem

ineffective, wide participation may seem unattainable, and uncertainty and resistance to change may be evident. However, this evaluation has shown that in spite of the barriers, both personal and structural, which limit participation and inhibit momentum, the success of participatory decision making does become evident. There are opportunities at this time of devolution in Queensland schools, for new approaches to be applied to solving problems and to building on existing strengths, and for real and effective power sharing to occur. Participatory action research, in particular, that explicitly seeks to create change by being inclusive of all members of the community, by valuing their inputs and varied experiences, by harnessing resources, recognising barriers and creating opportunities has the potential to enact devolution and meet the particular concerns of any school community.

The Healthy Schools approach, as the Ashgrove Healthy Schools Environment Project has demonstrated, functions in both curriculum development and community development, thus giving it wide applicability in both the schooling and broader sectors of community life. Evidence from other Healthy School projects indicates that where a project is initiated by teachers, there is likely to be a stronger curriculum development orientation, as this is the major focus and responsibility of teachers. Where a project is initiated by parents as representatives of the community, it appears more likely that a project will have a stronger community development focus. This latter has certainly been the experience with the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project. Each orientation will have elements of the other but the focus appears to be determined largely by the roles in a school held by those who manage the project.

For teachers particularly, the Healthy Schools process has the capacity to act as a catalyst for curriculum redefinition. Potentially, there can be a reorientation from a teacher-directed, subject defined, 'inside' classroom curriculum to a more integrated approach that acknowledges the whole setting of the school. With this broader approach to curriculum, a Healthy Schools project is the ideal vehicle for developing and implementing innovative curricula, especially education *for* the environment and health education that adopts an ecological health promotion focus.

Where a Healthy Schools project is initiated and managed by parents, a Healthy Schools approach is more explicitly about community development. The potential of a project with this orientation is considerable - especially in communities where 'disempowerment' and 'lack of ownership' are strongly felt. Healthy Schools projects, in collaboration with, as adjuncts to, or as initiators of Healthy Communities approaches to community development, can serve to replicate, reinforce or introduce principles of empowerment and emancipation. The potential exists for health and community workers, members of environmental organisations, social service providers and others to make decisions with and for schools and the wider community of which schools are a part.

This recognition that individual Healthy Schools initiatives may lie on different parts of a curriculum-community continuum, reveals the enormous potential of the process. However, it also implies that flexible approaches to funding and other resourcing support, approaches to co-ordination, communication strategies and evaluation will need to be developed. This is essential, not only to keep faith with the Healthy Schools approach that is based on individual 'settings', but also as recognition that 'achievements' may be less tangible in one project than in another. The power base from which the change-agents are drawn may differ markedly. Barriers and resistance to change may be more entrenched in one setting than in another. Measuring changes in the 'sense of community' of a school may be harder to determine than, say, the activities of classes in gardening or water quality monitoring. Consequently, creating momentum and defining outcomes in some projects may vary from relatively short to very long time periods. In some schools and communities where faith in health, education and social service delivery is weak, observable or measurable outcomes for a Healthy Schools project may take decades. In any case, some outcomes, particularly those indicating greater 'emancipation' and 'empowerment' may not be able to be effectively measured at all.

5.6 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study into the participatory processes of the Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project indicate that change in schools is possible. It requires a deeply held commitment to change from the 'grassroots' of the school community. In a political environment promoting power sharing, the likelihood of effective change is

increased when schools also recognise and embrace the changes. It does require, however, a harnessing of *individual* concerns and efforts into a *collective* movement for reform.

The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project, though, is not a blueprint for change. As the Healthy Schools approach is one that is based on 'settings', each school community will have to invent its own model, based on the examination of its own needs and the constraints and opportunities for change within its own school culture. It will then need to develop its own sets of strategies for building and maintaining support. This provides the community with the ownership of its problems and the ownership of its solutions. This is what democratic participation is all about.

However, projects such as this, which are based upon an emancipatory approach to schooling, offer a way forward that is positive, caring and supportive of all the people who 'live' in schools, or interact with them, for a large part of the day - children, teachers, parents and administrators. They provide the initial tentative steps towards building a citizenry that may collectively lift thinking beyond short-term problems and solutions and direct energies towards the adoption of long-term actions that build futures that are healthful, just and sustainable.

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